NEW

# HISTORY OF PAGANISM

From the Gods of the ancients to the new religions of today

Digital Edition

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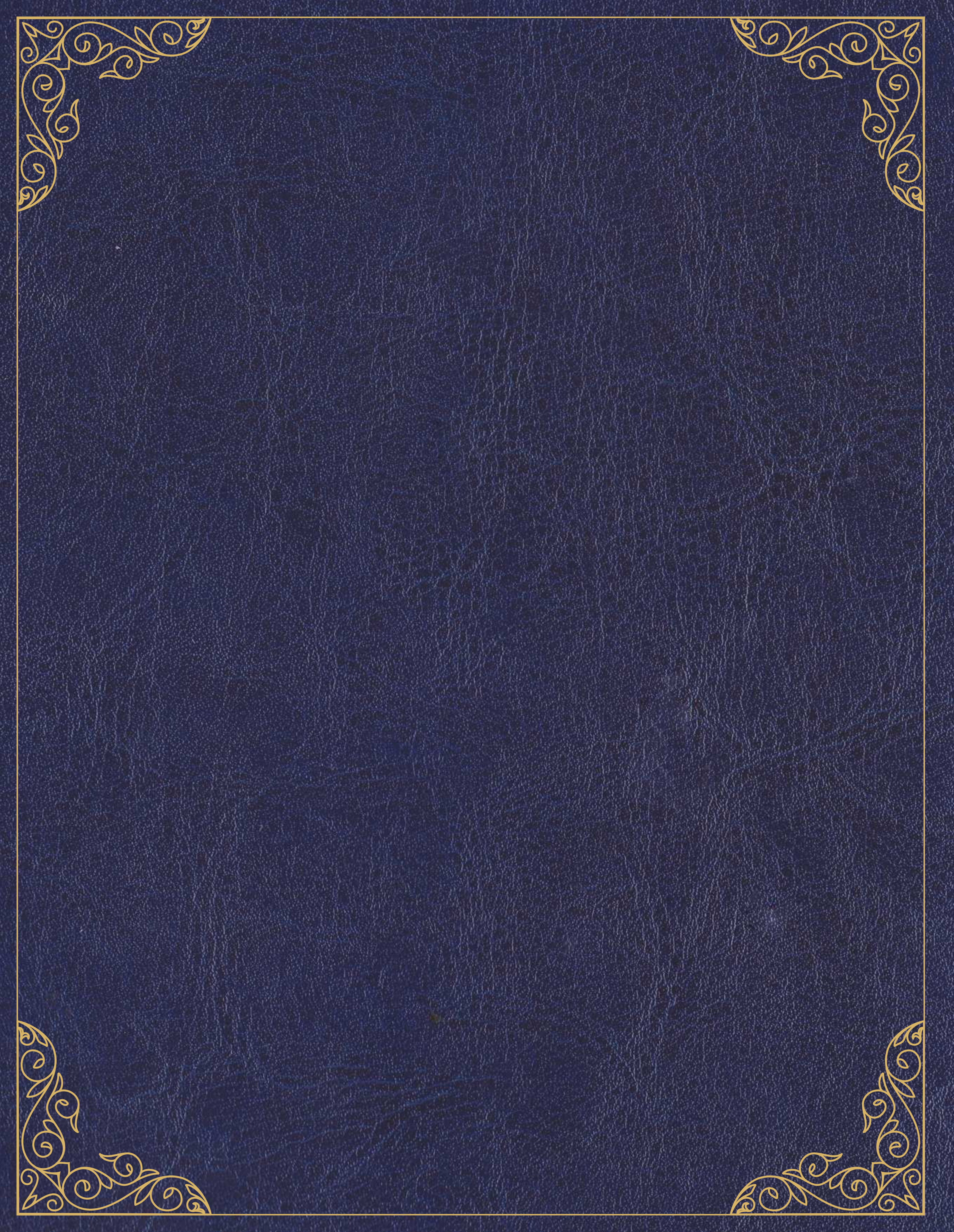
From the makers of ALL ABOUT HISTORY



Welcome to

# HISTORY OF PAGANISM

What's the difference between 'pagan' and 'Pagan'? We use the first to describe the historical followers of ancient polytheistic and pantheistic religions, the pre-Christian Egyptians, Greeks and Romans, Celts and Norse and Anglo-Saxons. They and their religions existed, in some cases, centuries before the term came into use. It was meant to be an insult, a put-down, used deliberately to infer that those who practiced such faiths were old-fashioned and out of the regular flow of society. Then, in the 20th century, the term was reborn. Today's Pagans have reappropriated it for their own use, to describe their practise of a collection of contemporary faiths rooted in those of yesteryear. This bookazine explores both, looking at the historical faiths of our ancestors and at how they have been revived today.

It's important to note that these pages focus on the European and Old World faiths that had a key influence on each other and on modern-day Paganism. Many poly- and pantheistic faiths from around the world, in particular those practised by peoples who were invaded and marginalised during the colonial era, were incorrectly classified as 'pagan' during the 18th and 19th centuries, resulting in decades of cultural appropriation of their sacred rites and symbols. Today, many indigenous communities around the world understandably don't want their unique religions lumped in with other, unrelated ones beneath an umbrella term that's far too large. For that reason, we'll concentrate solely on the modern-day Paganism of the West, and the faiths from our shared historical heritage that inform and inspire many of its traditions.

FUTURE

# HISTORY OF PAGANISM

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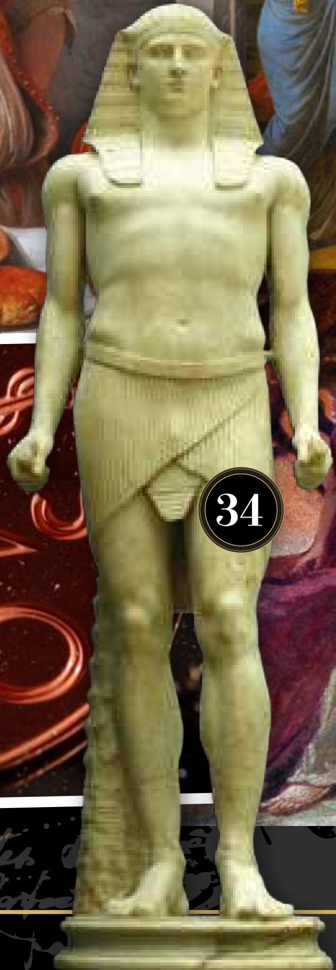

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Aradia
or the
Gospel of the
Witches
by
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London
David Nutt,
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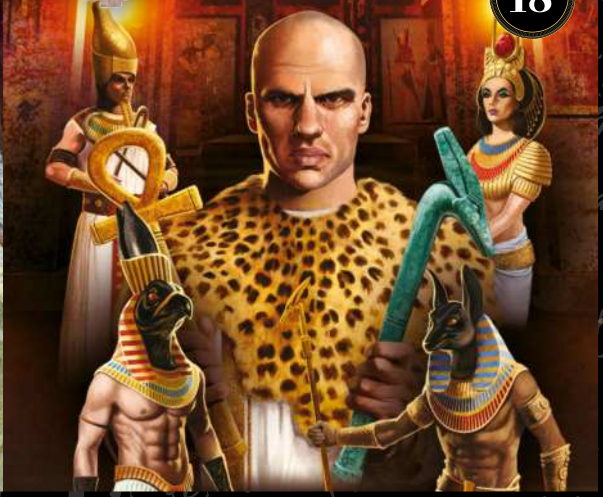
1899



# Paganism: From past to present

With many modern practitioners claiming ancient roots to their beliefs, just what is the true history of paganism across the world?

Written by Dee Dee Chainey

## Paganism: from ancient to modern

**Primal rites**
Paleolithic peoples create artwork based around the acknowledgement of prey animals and the ritual propitiation of their ancestors. Some paintings include strange, human-animal hybrids that are later theorised to be shamanistic figures.
**Paleolithic era**

**Ancient Mesopotamian religion**
Polytheistic belief in ancient Mesopotamia spanned numerous cultures, including Sumer, Akkad, Assyria and Babylonia. The creation epic – the story of the goddess Tiamat – is named the Enuma Elish. Numerous versions exist, and many scholars believe the story dates to the late second-millennium BCE or before.

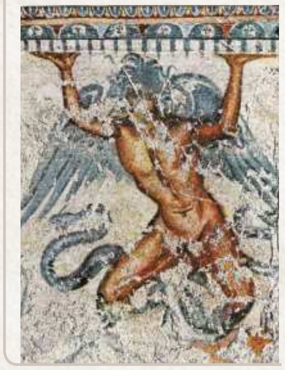
Image source:: Pixabay

### Defining moment

### The first ritual monuments of Europe

### 4th – 3rd millennium BCE

While the word 'paganism' was never applied to early ritual practices from the Neolithic period, it is here that we see the first rituals monuments of Europe being built – many of which are still used today by modern Pagans. Megalithic tombs were used as tribal territorial markers, and for collectively burying the dead. Many were orientated to the solar festivals. Newgrange, in Ireland, has a small hole in the front chamber which aligns to the midwinter solstice sunrise, allowing light to enter the tomb on this day. Many modern Pagans still flock there to mark this festival, in a revival of ancient practices.



### Defining moment

### The decline of the Etruscans

### Late 4th century BCE

Polytheistic Etruscan religion, beginning in the 7th century BCE, specifically acted as an entry point for Greek deities and myth to be introduced into Roman worship. The Etruscans believed that deities controlled all natural phenomena in the world, and could be bargained with to change their will. Main deities of their pantheon included the earth goddess, Cel, the sky god, Tin, and his consort, Uni. Believers would leave offerings to the gods, who resided in sacred places like tombs, where ancestor worship also took place – for example at Tarquinia, in Lazio, Italy. By the late 4th century BCE, Etruscan religion began to be assimilated into the Roman religion that surrounded it. While divination was common in many traditions, the Etruscans were particularly well-known for the practice.

**The druids of the Celtic Iron Age**
The first mention of the druids appeared in *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* by Julius Caesar, written some time in the 50s BCE. The druids were suppressed during the reigns of emperors Tiberious and Claudius, and are not mentioned after 1 CE.
**1st century BCE**

**The word 'paganism'**
The word 'pagan' was first used as a derogatory term to mean someone practicing a polytheistic religion by Christians in the Roman Period, in the 4th century. Before this, it merely meant 'civilian'.
**4th century CE**

Today, the word 'pagan', for many, conjures up images of nubile maidens frolicking naked under the full moon, or costume-clad revellers cavorting around burning effigies among ancient stones. While these scenes may contain elements of truth, they couldn't be further from the reality of the modern religious traditions covered by the umbrella term 'Pagan' today. For centuries, it was claimed that 'witches' worshipped the Devil, acting as his servants on earth and dealing in diabolical magic. Yet, despite some of the Pagan deities often being depicted with horns or antlers, like the Horned God and Cernunnos, true Pagans do not even believe in the Christian Devil, so the idea of Pagans as Devil-worshippers is nonsense. While many misconceptions abound, encompassed within these pages are a range of articles that aim to separate fact from fiction, true history from fallacy, and uncover the real face of Paganism by casting aside millennia of bias, rumour and denigration, perpetuated since the ancient Romans themselves first made such wild claims. The scope here is limited purely to Western paganism, from antiquity to the modern day, and no attempt will be made to include religions from further afield to keep a clear focus and avoid appropriation. A narrow definition of ancient paganism will be explored, used in the past to speak about those involved in the worship of nature and associated deities. Pagans in the past, as well as those today, often revered more than one deity, usually with at least one god and goddess, and often many more, forming a pantheon of gods and goddesses; this is called polytheism. Pantheism was also common, where people believed that the universe itself is a manifestation of the divine. In pantheism, no particular god or goddess exists as an entity. While many different types of pantheism have existed, in many different forms, usually 'god', or the divine, is composed of the physical world itself and everything in it - a living, breathing planet, with the sacred residing within all things, and within each one of us. Many are still pantheists today. We will also explore contemporary Western Neo-Pagan practices said to stem from these older traditions.

Many Pagans are pantheists, believing that nature and the universe are manifestations of the divine

Image source: Getty

"True Pagans do not believe in the Christian Devil"

**Christianity becomes the religion of Rome**
Roman polytheistic religion was replaced by Christianity in the 4th century CE. Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in the year 313 CE., which decriminalised Christianity. In 380 CE Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, with the Edict of Thessalonica.
**380 CE**

**The Prose Edda**
Snorri Sturluson is thought to have compiled this collection of Norse myths, legends and history from earlier texts in the 13th century. While its accuracy is challenged, it has become one of the definitive works of ancient Norse religion.
**13th century**

## Defining moment
### Neo-Pagan popularity
### 2011

By the year 2011, the UK Census reported that approximately 53,172 people claimed Paganism as their religion in England alone, with 3,448 in Wales. This number does not include those who identified themselves as belonging to particular traditions, so it is likely that the number is much higher than this. A campaign was held at the time, to encourage practitioners to list their religion under the umbrella term 'Pagan', rather than their specific path, to give a clear indication of the number of adherents. The same census reported those identifying with the Wiccan religion, a specific branch of Paganism, numbered 11,026 in England and 740 in Wales.

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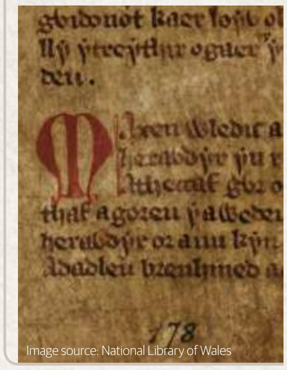


Image source: National Library of Wales

## Defining moment
### The Mabinogion
### 12th-13th centuries

*The Mabinogion* is one of the earliest sources of British myths and legends. Written in Middle Welsh, two main sources outline 11 Welsh tales dating from earlier, oral traditions. These are *The Red Book of Hergest*, and *The White Book of Rhyderch*. The first version of the tales published in English date to the 18th and 19th centuries, yet the versions by Lady Charlotte Guest are by far the most famous as it was the first complete volume. The text is said to be made up of four parts, called the 'Four Branches of the Mabinogi'.

**Alchemy in Europe**
Many claim alchemy was introduced into Latin Europe in 1144 CE when *Book of the Composition of Alchemy* was translated from Arabic. The translator himself, Robert of Chester, states this as fact in his preface to the book.
**1144 CE**

**Wicca**
Wicca was first officially introduced to the world by Gerald Gardner in 1954. The initial premise for the tradition, based on earlier beliefs and practices, was initially conceived by Gardner and Doreen Valiente a decade before.
**1954**

**Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids**
OBOD, the order's acronym, was founded in 1964 by Ross Nichols, after splitting with the Ancient Druid Order. The focus of the group is to teach the principles of Druidry, and since its founding it has become the most well-known Druid organisation in the world.
**1964**

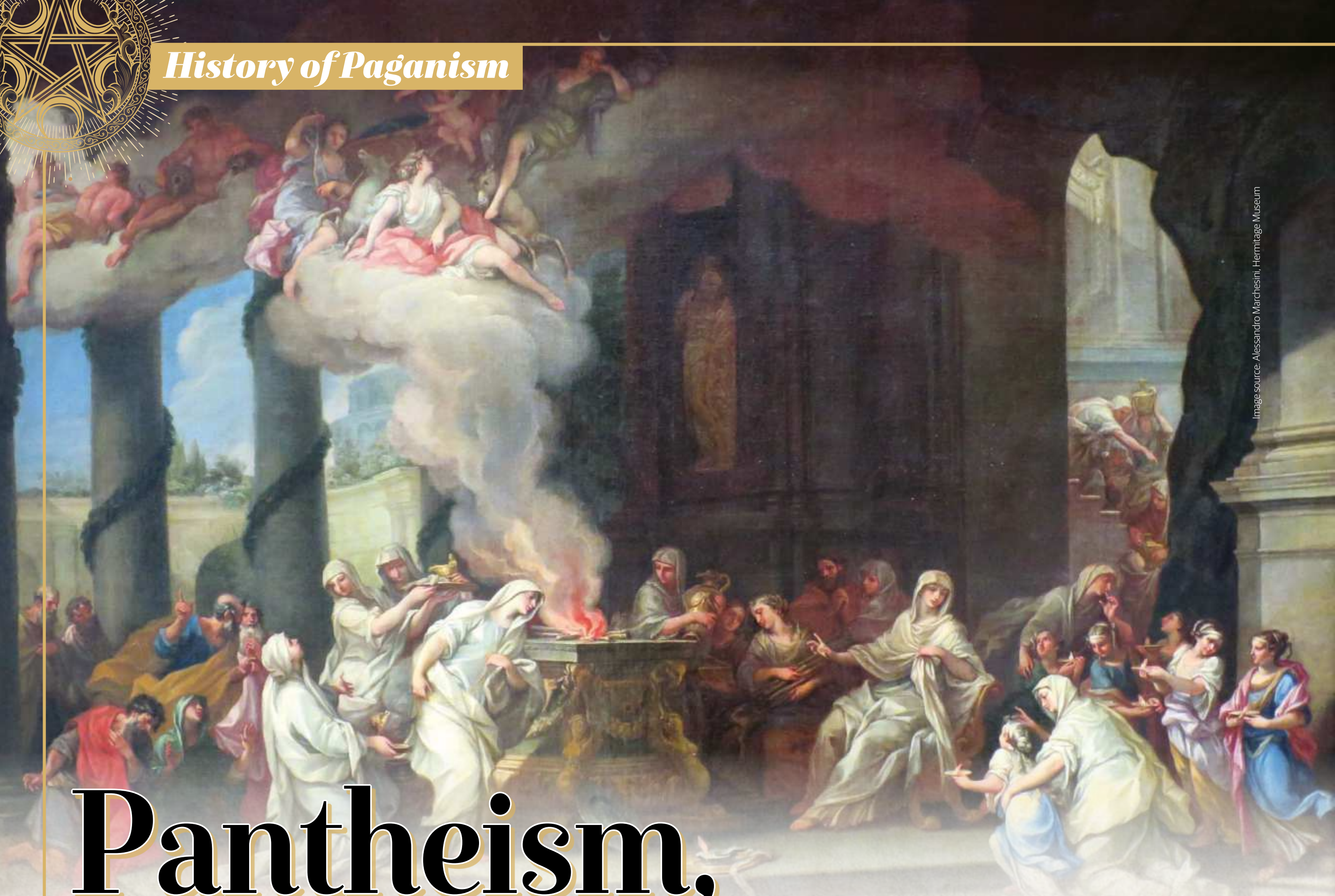


Image source: Alessandro Marchesini, Hermitage Museum

**Vestal virgins were female devotees of the Roman hearth goddess, Vesta, charged with protecting Vesta's flame, from which any householder could relight their own hearth**

# Pantheism, polytheism and nature-based faiths

For thousands of years, people engaged in nature worship, revering pantheons of gods. Yet this was not one unified religion, but spanned many traditions

People have wondered at the mysteries of the natural world since the times of prehistoric tombs and stone circles were erected, observing the seasons and the dance of the Sun and Moon in the heavens, and across time, these beliefs have been held by major religions and minor cults alike. From the beginnings of recorded history, humankind has tried to make sense of their grandeur, revering the astral bodies and phenomena of the natural world as gods. In many ancient faiths, the world began when order was brought to the world by the gods. For the ancient Babylonians, the first gods were a dragon-like race of beings, with the world springing from Tiamat, the great dragon, a symbol of chaos and destruction. Ancient Greek faith was no different, and Hesiod's *Theogony*, from 700 BCE tells the story of the beginning of the cosmos, when the gods established their dominion over all things. Here, a race of primordial gods was born: a way of understanding the ebb and flow of the planet's natural cycles, and aetiological myths sprung up to explain their role and existence in life: In the beginning was Chaos, the genderless void. From this primordial being were born the deathless gods: Gaia (Earth), Tartarus (the Deep Abyss), Eros (Desire), Erebus (Darkness) and Nyx (Night). Next, from Gaia followed Uranus (Sky), Ourea (Mountains) and Pontus (Sea). A pantheistic belief, Gaia is seen as the personification of the Earth itself, and the beginning of all life upon it. Through union with her son-lovers, Uranus and Pontus, she gave birth to the Titans - the second generation of gods and the first pantheon - also, the giants and the sea gods. A firm distinction is made in Greek myth between the primordial gods, and the Olympians - the third and fourth generation of gods, children of Kronus, the youngest Titan who overthrew his father, Uranus, to establish the Olympians gods as the new

## The Old Norse religion

Originally an oral tradition, much of what we know about the religion comes from Old Norse and Icelandic texts – including the *Eddas* and *Sagas* – which were written between the 8th to 14th centuries CE, yet incorporated elements of earlier beliefs. The Norse pantheon consisted of two groups of gods, the Æsir, who represented universal forces in the cosmos and kept primordial chaos at bay – including the gods Odin and Thor, and the Vanir – including Freya and Freyr. While originally warring groups, they eventually realised that they could co-exist and formed a truce. Unlike gods in some other polytheistic religions, the Norse gods were not all powerful, but limited by fate: Baldr, the shining one, actually dies at one point, to later return to life after Ragnarök, the ultimate battle. Further races appear in the mythology, from dwarves, to vættir -animistic spirits of the land – to jötnar, or giants, the ancestors and enemies of the gods, who can intermarry with them. In practice, followers of this tradition were not led by priests, but instead rituals and worship were led by kings and chiefs, including sacrifices. Wandering female seeresses, or völva, moved from place to place, bartering divination, healing and prophesy for food and lodging as part of their shamanic magical practice called seiðr.

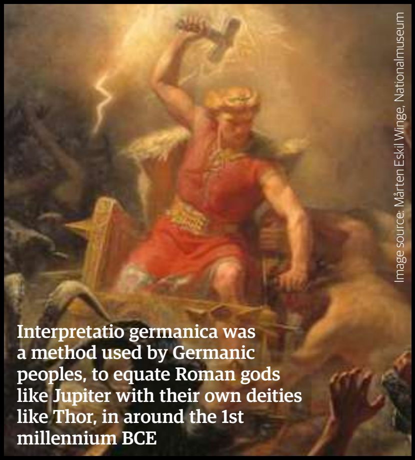


Image source: Mårten Eskil Winge, Nationalmuseum

**Interpretatio germanica was a method used by Germanic peoples, to equate Roman gods like Jupiter with their own deities like Thor, in around the 1st millennium BCE**

divine rulers. Tradition taught that Kronos, too, would in time be overthrown by his own son, Zeus. Like in many ancient polytheistic religions, we see the imagery of a new wave of gods replacing an older group, and many scholars see this as a sign of a new culture or wave of belief replacing an older religion within a region, cultural displacement of belief told through stories of cosmic battles and end-times myths.

Ancient Greek religion was complex, made up of many different traditions, yet it comprised of three parts: the worship of deities, heroes and the dead. There was no official priesthood, or unified canonical text for people to follow, religious ceremonies were undertaken at a local level, conducted by local priests or overseen by well-established families.

While most ceremonies were performed at altars, with animal sacrifice and food offerings given up to the gods while prayers were said or hymns sung, some did not have such temples. One of the most shadowy and intriguing goddess cults is that of Nyx, a chthonic goddess, and personification of night. Texts say that black bulls were sacrificed up to her, with their entrails burned on purifying fires as milk flowed upon them. One of the most well-known forms of ancient Greek cult worship was the Eleusinian Mysteries, annual rites dedicated to the agricultural goddess Demeter. In associated myths, the cyclical nature of the year and its seasons are explained by the abduction of the goddess' daughter, Persephone, to the Underworld – which equates to winter – and her return, with the onset of spring. Hero cults were a huge part of ancient Greek belief, arising from older ancestor cults, and centring on hero figures thought to be semi-divine. This type of worship focussed on heroes' tombs, with chthonic rites performed to honour them like sacrifice and libations of wine or grains; they were believed to offer protection to those living near to their resting places.

> Many areas had localised and specific gods during the Iron Age. We know little about these unique local gods and traditions

Interpretatio graeca was a concept where other religions and belief systems were compared and contrasted to Greek models, in order to understand them better. Many Roman beliefs paralleled the Greek, and often deities were paired with their Greek counterparts: Roman Jupiter and the Greek Zeus were equated as omnipotent sky gods. The Romans were well-known for the sheer number of deities that they worshipped, as well as for the equation of native gods with their own for purposes of integration of indigenous populations during the creation of their empire. There was a great focus on the proper methods of practice of prayer and ritual in Roman beliefs, as it was believed to enhance social order. The practice of divination by auguries was common. Roman religion was deeply intertwined with normal everyday life, and worship often took place at a very low-level: most families would worship their own household gods at a family shrine set up within their homes.

Celtic religion usually refers to the beliefs of the people of Iron Age and Roman periods in Britain, along with the Celtic tribes of Gaul, the Hallstatt and La Tène cultures of the 8th century BCE to the end of the 5th century CE. Lucan, a 1st century CE Roman poet, acknowledges their worship of a triad of deities, including Taranis, god of thunder, Esus and Toutatis. Belief in the antlered god Cernunnos seems to have been widespread, as evidenced on the Gundestrup cauldron, yet many Iron Age gods were worshipped at a local level, and were specific to their region. Much of what we know about these religions comes from archaeology, and from classical writers, whose accounts were filled with propaganda against a foreign people – nothing about religion is recorded in writing from the Celts themselves.. These accounts report a special priestly class of druids, who performed divination from the flight of birds and entrails of sacrifices animals. Much later, in the Middle Ages, Welsh and Irish Christian clerics recorded old myths and epic tales, attributed to the Celtic peoples, yet the religion had already died out by this stage. The material remains controversial to this day, with some believing they contain ancient wisdom passed on by the bards of oral tradition, while others argue the tales, while attractive, are pure fabrication by later monks.

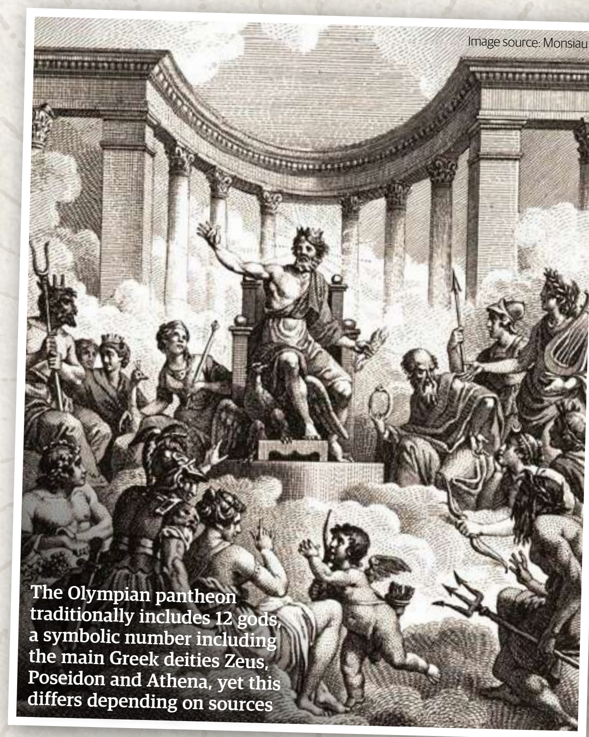
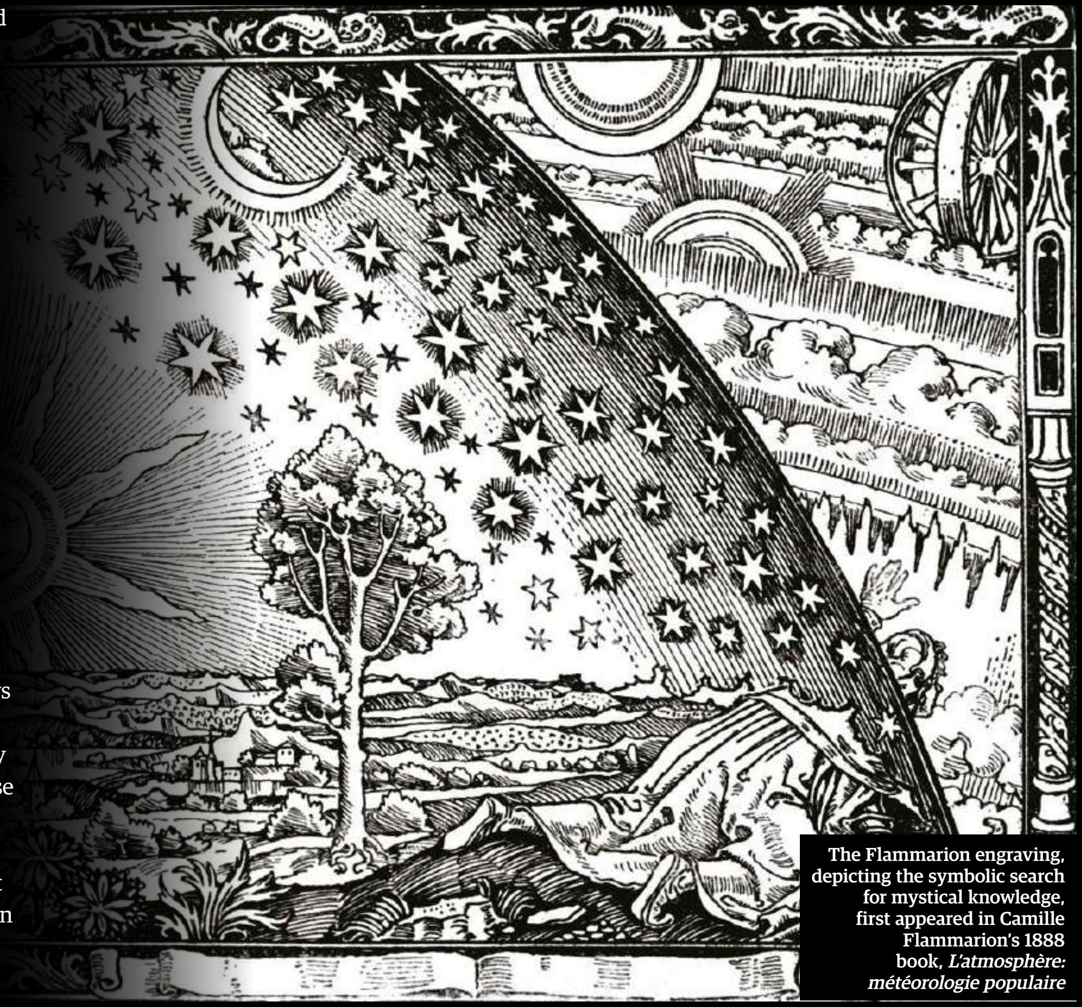


Image source: Monsiau

**The Olympian pantheon traditionally includes 12 gods, a symbolic number including the main Greek deities Zeus, Poseidon and Athena, yet this differs depending on sources**

# Early paganism: fact or fiction?

While the word 'pagan' has ancient roots, just who were these early practitioners: the first pagan precursors or just idolatrous heretics?



The Flammarion engraving, depicting the symbolic search for mystical knowledge, first appeared in Camille Flammarion's 1888 book, *L'atmosphère: météorologie populaire*

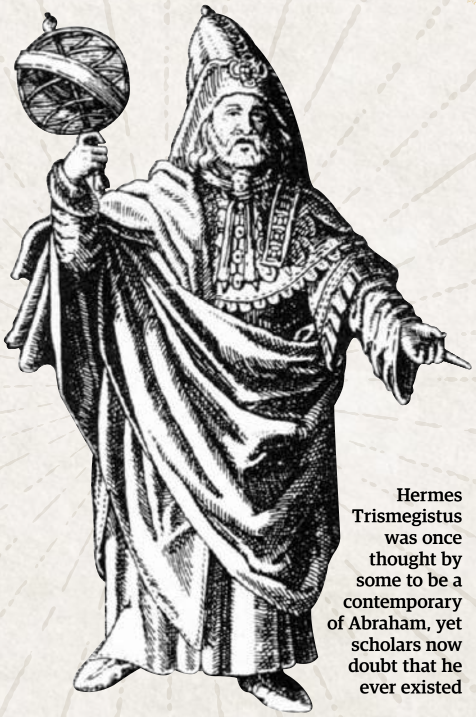
Image source: Camille Flammarion

Originally, the word 'pagan' only existed to express a sense of 'otherness', without actually defining a particular group or religion. The word 'paganus' was first used in the Roman Empire, meaning 'country dweller'. By the 5th century it had become a slur, used by Christians to describe anyone who followed the old gods after Christianisation had become widespread, or followed a non-Abrahamic faith in general. The word held connotations of barbarism and belonging to the rustic, uneducated country-folk, instead of the modern, educated city dwellers. Ironically, most push-back against Christianity came from groups working within cities. Because of this, the religious overtones are now thought by some to stem from 2nd and 3rd century use by Roman soldiers to indicate civilians, or even someone incompetent belonging to the military itself, and many suggest that it was adopted because of its symbolism, with Christians considering themselves 'milites Christi', or soldiers in Christ.

Most of what we know about pagans from early times is purely from the words of clerics and those aiming to press their Christian faith on peoples that were unbelievers, with descriptions of them brimming with prejudice and propaganda against them. There was, in fact, no such thing as a 'pagan religion'; people castigated as 'pagans' practiced a range of beliefs and rituals, and could belong to any number of religious sects across the world - including all polytheistic and nature-based faiths. Equivalent words were 'Hellenes' - worshippers of Greek pantheons - and 'háithnô' for Gothic tribes, with 'heathen' itself linked to Old English 'hæðen' and likened to Old High German 'heidan', with many tracing it to mean 'heath-dweller'. None of these words would be used by practitioners to self-identify or describe their own beliefs and traditions, and this was the case right up until the 20th century.

During the medieval period this trend continued, and 'pagan' was used to describe anyone following an exotic or obscure religion, used to imply that practitioners worshipped idols: they were heretics contravening the Christian faith. By the 16th century the word was used to indicate anyone following a false religion - including Catholicism, when seen against the backdrop of the Protestant Reformation.

Throughout the Middle Ages and the early modern period, witch-hunts became common, "By the 17th century, the popularity of magic and related ideas began to wane"



**Hermes Trismegistus was once thought by some to be a contemporary of Abraham, yet scholars now doubt that he ever existed**

and many people were tried - and killed - for performing magic and sorcery. The Inquisition, beginning in 12th century France, spread throughout much of Europe, to the point where both the Spanish and Portugese led campaigns against heresy across their empires, with tribunals undertaken in non-Christian cultures across Africa, Asia and the Americas. In the 16th century, the Goa Inquisition went so far as to try recently converted Christians for reverting back to their old polytheistic faiths of Hinduism, as well as Islam.

While ancient 'pagan' practices were many and varied, the ancient mythology of the Greek and Roman world itself saw new popularity with alchemists and magicians alike during the Renaissance. For those in the upper echelons of society, it seemed natural to turn to the occult for answers to questions that could not be answered by science. This only fed the opposition to the practice of witchcraft, and what was once seen as mere folk religion was, by the mid-15th century , viewed as a highly developed theology of the Devil, instigating more prosecutions for witchcraft in Europe. Yet, for the alchemists and magicians, Graeco-Roman mythology became popular once more. With origins in Late Antiquity linked with Hellenism and Gnosticism, Hermeticism came into its own in the 15th century. This was an esoteric tradition involving the teachings of the elusive and mythical figure of Hermes Trismegistus, mentioned by Plutarch in the first century CE. His body of texts, known as the *Hermetic Corpus*, was said to draw upon the ancient Egyptian mythology of the god Thoth, and the Greek god Hermes in a three-fold form. His teachings were said to centre around alchemy, magic, and astrology. During the Renaissance, magic and ritual were inexorably linked with spiritual and religious beliefs, and held a fascination for many who saw their practice as a high art. The artes magicae, or seven magical arts set out in 1456, were practices forbidden by the Church, that included necromancy, and telling the future through cards, bones or visions rising in fire or smoke amongst others. Hermeticism soon developed to include a wide array of esoteric beliefs and ideas.

By the 17th century, the popularity of magic and related ideas began to wane for many due to the dangers faced during the witch persecutions. This time was labelled the period of Disenchantment.

During the early modern period, the word 'paganism' became an umbrella term, encompassing many disparate ideas and peoples. Scholars - in a sense proto-anthropologists - began to classify all polytheistic faiths under this label, which held disdainful Western connotations of the primitive. These very different religions - from all across the world - were syncretised and bundled together as 'polytheistic faiths', often resulting in glaringly inaccurate perceptions of their core values and beliefs. This trend ran parallel to the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire, and a rise of colonialism, with the British Empire being regarded with fresh esteem.

The Romanticism of the 18th and 19th centuries saw a renewed interest in the religions and practices of the ancient world, from Greece to Rome, and further afield. The Brothers Grimm were working during this time in Germany, fascinated with piecing together beliefs and practices from earlier times from folk and fairy tales, with Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe playing the same role in Norwegian legends and traditions. With the Victorians came an obsession with the mysteries of ancient Egypt, soon labelled as 'Egyptomania'. Some pantheons, like those of the Greco-Roman world, were seen as more civilised than others, warranting greater attention from inquisitive followers. During this time, prominent British figures stepped forward to lead a revival in faiths closer to home, one of these being Welsh doctor, William Price. Influenced by similar efforts by antiquarian and sometime-fantasist Iolo Morganwg in the 18th century, Price, an ardent nationalist, attempted to revive what he believed was the ancient Celtic religion of the druids. As Arch Druid, he founded a druid group, and organised an eisteddfod at Pontypridd in 1844.

Early anthropologists used 'pagan' as an umbrella term, projecting colonial bias onto disparate and rich polytheistic traditions

## Hermeticism and Paracelsus

The famous German alchemist and astrologer, Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, was more commonly known as Paracelsus. Interested in medicine and toxicology, he introduced new Hermetic ideas of illness in the 16th century, believing that the human body and the natural world around it were in sync. This was the core belief at the centre of his *Doctrine of Signatures*, that all ailments must have a matching cure, with many of the plants used resembling the specific part of the body they would naturally heal. Many see him as a prophet, with the ability to divine the future, yet he is also known for his dabbling in demonology. Another striking addition to Hermetic thought, later adopted by many Pagans today, was the idea of elemental beings, with a different type of creature linked to each element: salamanders for fire, undines for water, sylphs for air and gnomes for earth. While many modern Pagans would not believe firmly in the existence of these beings, they do sometimes come into beliefs and practices for some. Many fraudulent writings, claiming to be from Paracalsus, were created in the 16th century – many so convincing that even experts cannot tell them apart.

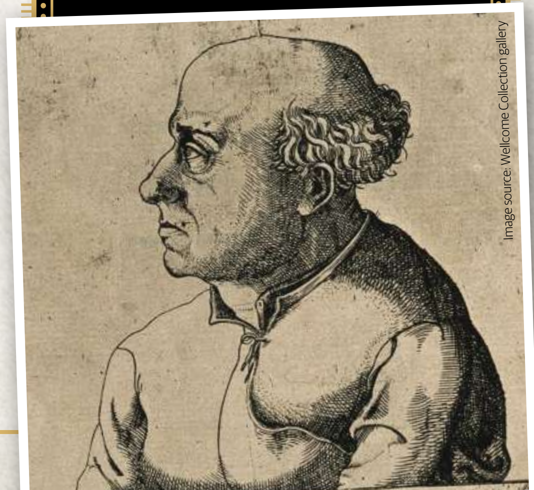


Image source: Wellcome Collection gallery

# Paganism today and the Occult Revival

Did modern day Pagan traditions stem from the 19th century interest in magic and the occult, or do they have a more ancient history?

Revellers wait for the sunrise on the Summer Solstice at Stonehenge each year, with many Pagans marking the festival in this way

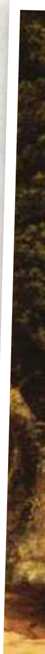
Image source: Getty

The Occult Revival of the 19th and 20th centuries saw a growing interest in occult and magical themes, delving into scientific theory, alchemy, astrology and the world of mediumship. Movements like theosophy and Hermeticism claimed to draw on ancient magic, often passed on to initiates within secret sects, working undercover to avoid persecution and detection by Christian oppressors. Much of this drew on the work of the alchemists from the 12th century to the Renaissance, who claimed to base their practices in ancient texts and beliefs - much of it Egyptian and classical, including attributing much to the shadowy figure of Hermes Trismegistus himself. Leading figures in the Occult Revival include Madame Blavatsky, Samuel Liddell Mathers, Arthur Edward Waite, and later Aleister Crowley, Dion Fortune, and Israel Regardie. By 1908 the term 'pagan' had been reclaimed, and became used to describe nature-worshippers, polytheists and pantheists alike.

Since then, the definition of the word has changed and developed over time, and meaning very different things to different people - even today, and it's one that is constantly being redefined. While many still equate Paganism with devil worship and Satanism, these are very distinct practices. Others are very wary of having their own religions and indigenous belief systems equated with modern Paganism, particularly non-Western faiths like Voudoun - which stems from African tradition - as well as Native American and First Nations groups. Appropriation is a major issue that many feel encroaches on their own belief system, with people from outside the cultures and religious traditions in essence 'cherry picking' beliefs, deities and practices that appeal to them, and mimicking these in their own personal practice. Many people claim that this shows a huge level of disrespect of sacred stories and practices that have often been passed down generations, and usually belong to groups that have traditionally been enslaved or persecuted, hence the argument that this cultural appropriation feels like yet another violation of things they hold sacred. Modern Pagan practitioners should always remain aware of the impact of performing sacred rites and rituals from indigenous and minority religions, one example being cleansing with white sage - a sacred Native American and First Nations act - mimicking sacred dress, or using traditional sacred stories from other faiths as part of their own beliefs.

Countless paths and traditions of modern Paganism exist today; most of these are a form of nature worship, and they usually have an element of polytheism or pantheism within them. Wicca is one of the most well-known. Many followers of this path call themselves witches, or Wiccans; their practice involves honouring the Goddess and her counterpart, the Horned God. Most practitioners follow a sequence of festivals known as the Wheel

"Appropriation is a major issue that many feel encroaches on their own belief system"



of the Year, a cycle of eight sacred festivals that follow the divine union of the Goddess and God, including his birth, their union, and his death and rebirth. Wiccans often use the symbol of the pentagram to express their beliefs in the elements: fire, earth, air, water and usually a fifth: spirit; the pentagram shows how all of these elements are related, and does not contain any overtones of evil or devil worship – it is a potent, inherently positive symbol that represents the balance of all things in the universe. Wiccans often use the Moon as a symbol of the Goddess, and link their practices with the waxing and waning of its cycle.

Image source: Malloym

Here, we see a pentagram laid out on a Wiccan altar. The pentagram symbolises veneration of the elements and cardinal points

There are two types of modern druidry or Druidism: revivalist druidry and reconstructionist druidry, both called a form of Celtic spirituality as they revere Celtic deities and the natural world. Practitioners come together to meet in groups, called 'groves', similar to the idea of a Wiccan coven. The Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids is an organisation with over 20,000 members, spanning 50 countries, dedicated to teaching about druidry – the name reflects the different levels of initiation into the tradition. Druids look to the old stories of the Welsh and Irish myths and legends, like those from the *Mabinogion*, and celebrate the deities therein. Many believe that the ancient teachings of the original druids are contained within these stories, and this is the only way of recovering knowledge of such ancient practices that were lost with the coming of Christianity, along with the writings of Christian clerics. Many argue against this, saying that these traditions do not trace back to ancient times, and are revivalist traditions. Claims abound that the tradition was reinvented in modern times, tracing modern druidry back to 18th century Britain when the Iron Age and Romano-British people – and their druid priests – were glorified and idealised within the Romanticist movement. Many say this gained religious elements in the 19th century, when practitioners tried to recreate a form of indigenous British spirituality, and argue there is no way that ancient Iron Age practices can be reproduced accurately, as too little is known about them; many practitioners refute this.

> There is debate as to whether today's Pagan practices follow ancient traditions or attempt to revive what we think those traditions were

Heathenry, or Heathenism, is a Pagan path that practitioners view as following the practices of the Germanic Peoples of the Iron Age and early medieval era, including Denmark and the southern areas of Norway and Sweden. Worship centres around animism, and the pre-Christian gods of the Vikings – Odin, Freyja, Baldr and others in the pantheon.

Practices and beliefs are reconstructed from fragmentary archaeological evidence and historical texts, including the *Prose* and *Poetic Eddas,* relating to myths, legends and histories. Two main parts of the tradition are seiðr – a shamanic type of magic that includes divination and shamanic journeying – and galdr, using spells and incantations, often in the form of chanting or song. Other practices include honouring the gods with libations of alcohol, often with a toast to the gods. Other forms of Heathenry can include traditions stemming from old German gods, or those of the Anglo-Saxons.

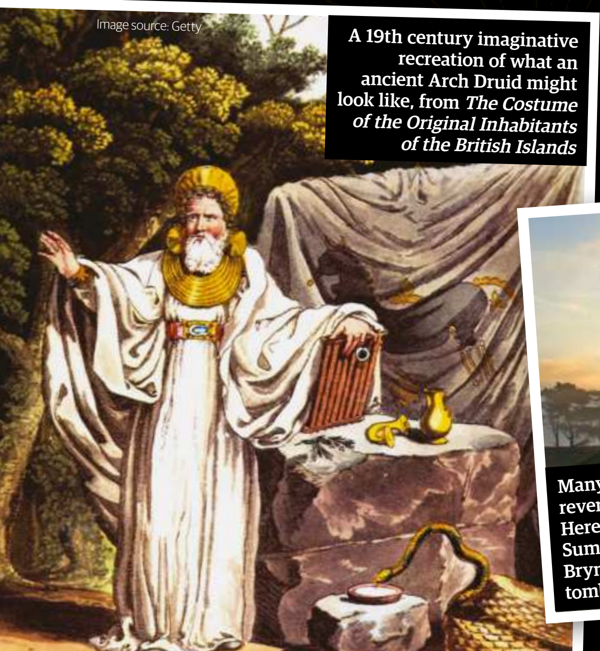


Image source: Getty

A 19th century imaginative recreation of what an ancient Arch Druid might look like, from *The Costume of the Original Inhabitants of the British Islands*

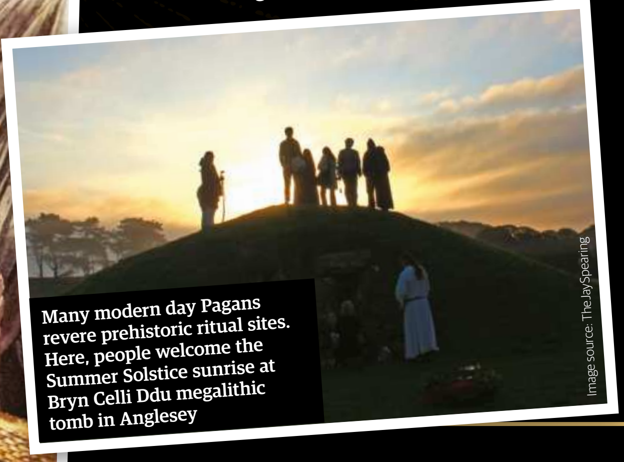


Image source: TheJaySpearing

Many modern day Pagans revere prehistoric ritual sites. Here, people welcome the Summer Solstice sunrise at Bryn Celli Ddu megalithic tomb in Anglesey

## Ethno-nationalism: Heathenry, racism and the alt-right

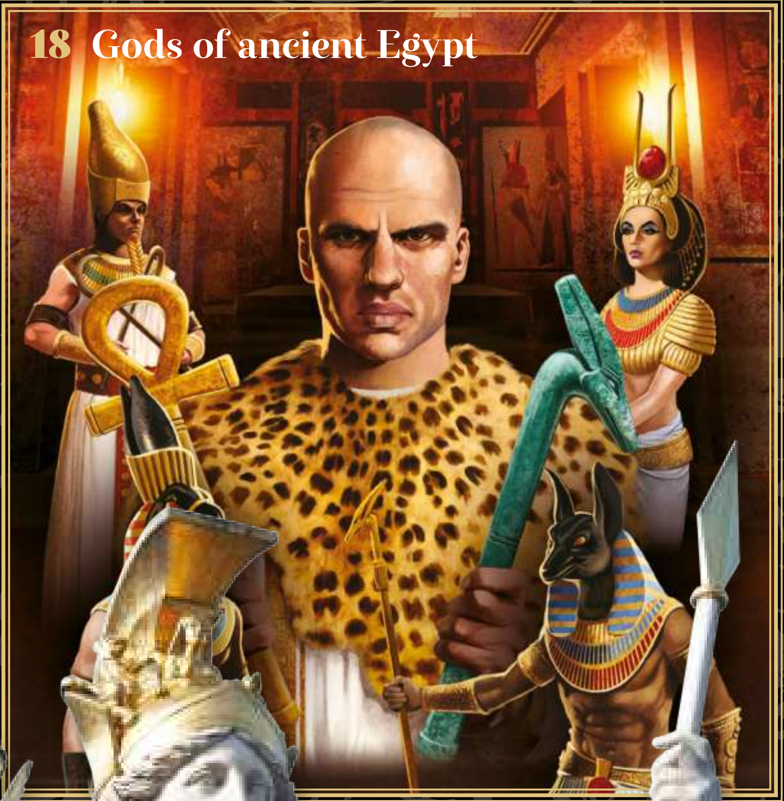
Unfortunately, mythology and religious traditions have a long history of being co-opted by minority groups with white nationalist and racist agendas. Ethno-nationalists and the alt-right often use ideas of an ancient hereditary tradition and belief system as a way of stirring up a tribal sense of belonging to a certain place and culture, which by default castigates anyone who does not share these traditions or tribal heritage as an outsider: often posing them as people to be feared, or conquered as an enemy. Today, some on the fringes of the Heathen movement misuse their tenets and myths, peddling racist agendas through the idea of a 'pure' race, who can trace their roots back to the Vikings, imagining themselves as warriors or shield maidens. Many of these people are shunned by mainstream Heathens, who remain angry that their beliefs are being misused and misrepresented by those with Neo-Nazi, and similar, agendas. Many of these ethno-nationalists are intent on spreading ludicrous conspiracy theories, posing non-white people as infiltrators intent on supplanting an imaginary 'European race', and usually targeting minority and vulnerable groups like refugees fleeing war as their enemies. Many such individuals have been linked to terrorist attacks throughout Europe and America. These groups should not be confused with true followers of the modern mainstream Heathenry, and they can often by identified by their use of the terms 'folkish' or 'volk', and sometimes claim 'Odinism' or 'Wotanism' as their faith.

CTRL ALT-RIGHT DELETE

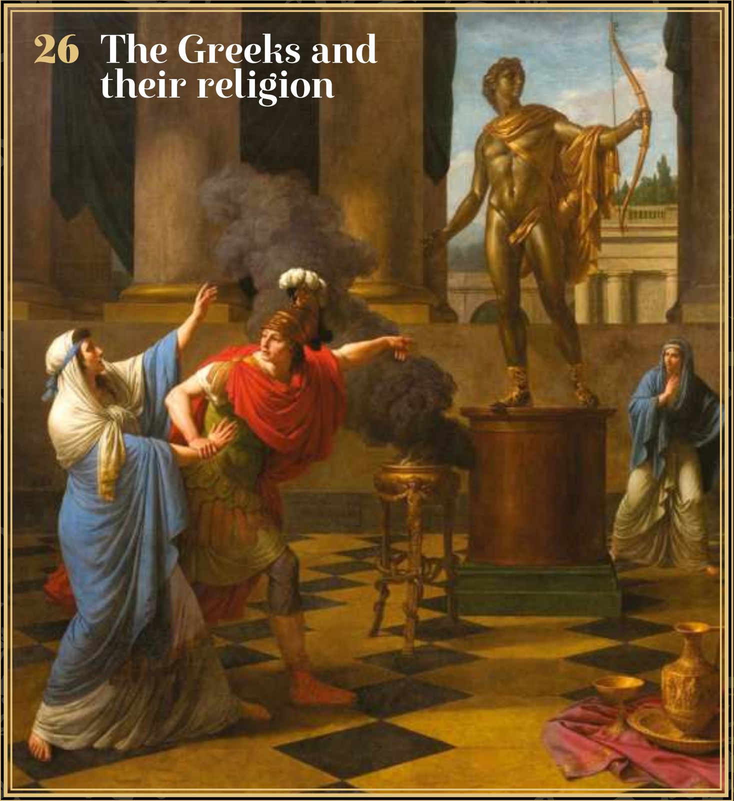
Image source: Mark Dixon

This anti alt-right placard from 2017 Women's March shows that there is a huge rejection of such beliefs in the mainstream

# PANTHEONS



18 Gods of ancient Egypt



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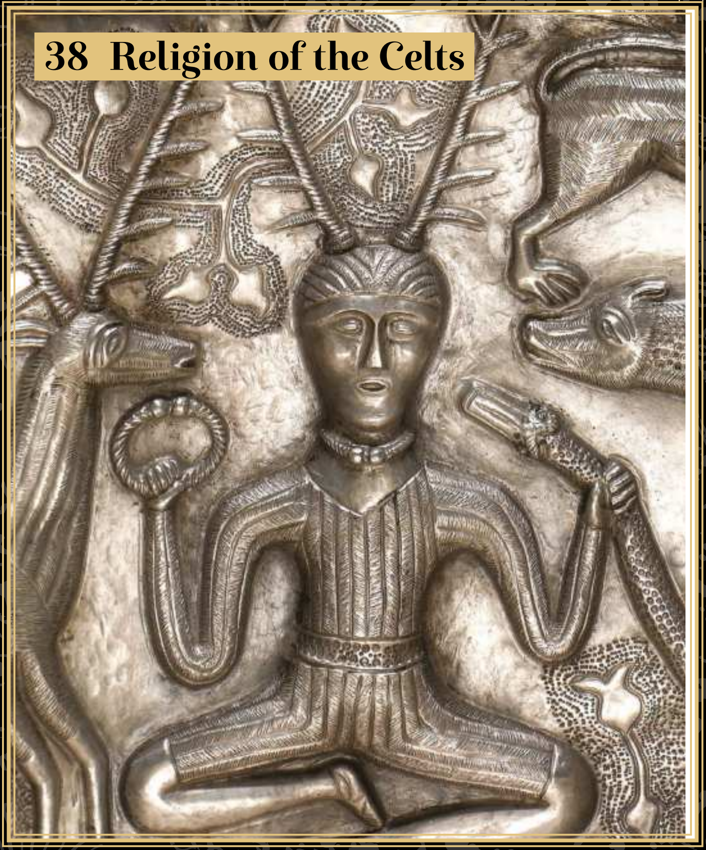

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# Gods of ancient Egypt

The ancient Egyptians are perhaps best known for their complex religion, whose hundreds of gods were worshipped in some of the most spectacular temples ever built

Written by Dom Reseigh-Lincoln

As early as 17,000 BCE, carvings of wild cattle alongside strange hybrid creatures at the site of Qurta in southern Egypt suggest an early belief in the hidden forces of nature. With Egypt's earliest stone sculpture at about 7,000 years old believed to represent a cow, it is clear this was an animal that played an important role in the lives of the early Egyptians. So too did their desert environment, in which the dominant Sun was worshipped as a variety of gods, much like the River Nile, whose annual life-bringing floodwaters were likewise venerated as divine.

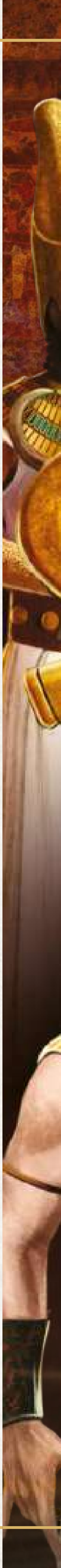
As these aspects of the natural world gradually developed into individual gods, each region of Egypt also had their own local deities whose characters evolved through stories and myths. One of the key myths for the ancient Egyptian people was the story of creation, when the primeval waters of chaos receded to reveal a mound of earth on which life first appeared.

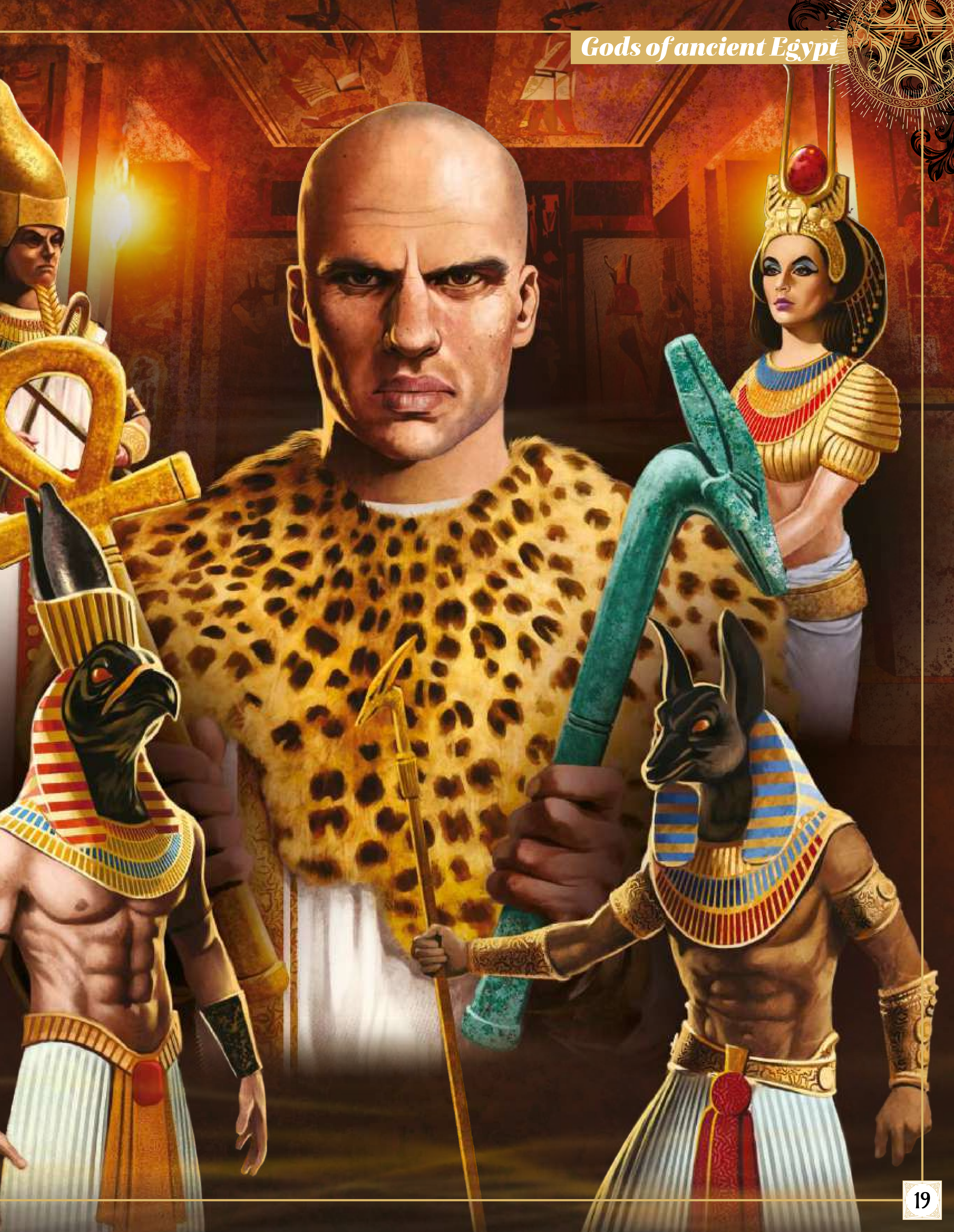
Yet with so many different deities throughout the Nile Valley, each region claimed that life had been created by their own local god. In Egypt's earliest capital, Memphis, their chief deity Ptah had emerged from the waters to summon up all living things by simply speaking their names, while at the nearby city of Sais, creation was regarded as the handiwork of the goddess Neith. Meanwhile at Hermopolis, life had been sparked into being through the combined energies of eight gods, four male frogs and four female snakes, while in the far south at Aswan, the ram-headed god Khnum had created all life on his potter's wheel.

But the most important creation myth centred on Heliopolis, where the supreme deity was the Sun god Ra. Worshipped as 'the Mother and Father of All', the Sun produced twin children Tefnut, goddess of moisture, and Shu, god of air, who in turn produced the sky goddess Nut and the earth god Geb, parents of twin couples Isis and Osiris, Seth and Nephthys.

With Isis and her brother Osiris claimed as Egypt's first rulers, they were succeeded by their son Horus, then the 'Followers of Horus', demigods who preceded the first human rulers, each of whom was regarded as the gods' child.

Over the subsequent 3,500 years of pharaonic history (c. 3100 BCE–395), Egypt's pantheon of deities continued to expand as more gods were introduced and some merged together, creating a complex and varied pattern of religion.

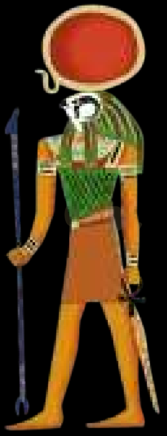




# Meet the gods of Egypt

Almost 1,500 deities are known by name and many of them combine with each other and share characteristics. Here are some of the most important

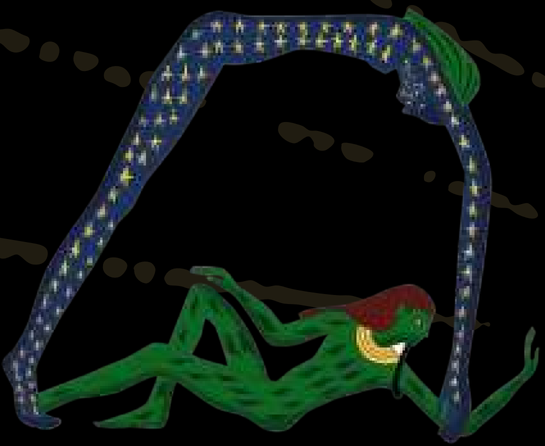
> To the Egyptians, writing was sacred as it gave reliability, and enabled all knowledge of the world to be recorded



## Ra

**God of the Sun**

Ra was Egypt's most important Sun god, also known as Khepri when rising, Atum when setting and the Aten as the solar disc. As the main creator deity, Ra also produced twin gods Shu and Tefnut.



## Geb

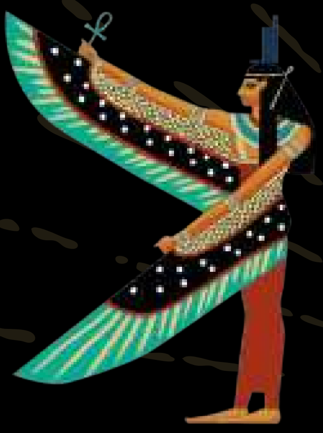
**God of the Earth**

As the grandson of Ra and the son of Shu and Tefnut, green-skinned Geb represented the Earth and was usually shown reclining, stretched out beneath his sister-wife Nut.

## Nut

**Goddess of the sky**

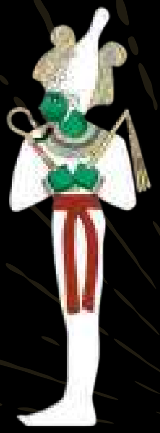
As granddaughter of Ra, Nut was the sky goddess whose star-spangled body formed the heavens, held above her brother Geb by their father Shu, god of air.



## Isis

**Goddess of motherhood and magic**

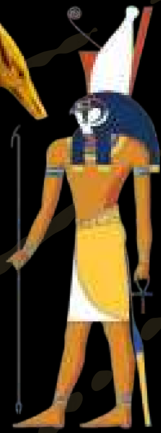
The daughter of Geb and Nut, Isis was the perfect mother who eventually became Egypt's most important deity, 'more clever than a million gods' and 'more powerful than 1,000 soldiers'.



## Osiris

**God of resurrection and fertility**

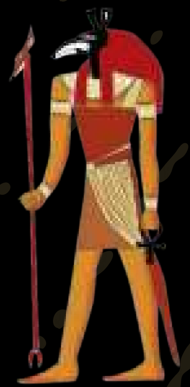
Isis's brother-husband Osiris was killed by his brother Seth, only to be resurrected by Isis to become Lord of the Underworld and the god of new life and fertility.



## Horus

**God of Kingship**

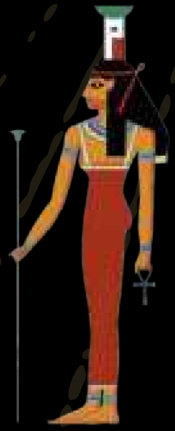
When his father Osiris became Lord of the Underworld, Horus succeeded him as king on Earth, and became the god with whom every human pharaoh was then identified.



## Seth

**God of storms and chaos**

Represented as a composite mythical creature, Seth was a turbulent god who killed his brother Osiris, only to be defeated by Osiris's son and avenger Horus, helped by Isis.



## Nephthys

**Goddess of protection**

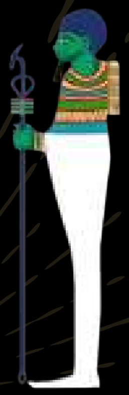
As fourth child of Geb and Nut, Nephthys was partnered with her brother Seth, but most often accompanied her sister Isis as twin protectors of the king and of the dead.

# The animal cults of ancient Egypt

The Egyptians greatly respected the natural world, particularly animals whose spirits were worshipped as divine. With Egypt's earliest known art representing animals alongside humans, various creatures were placed in human burials as early as c. 4000 BCE, and the relationship was a fundamental part of Egypt's evolving religion.

Gods could be portrayed entirely as an animal, or in human (anthropomorphic) form with an animal's head, as imitated by masked priests. Many deities also had a sacred creature, which was worshipped in life then mummified at death.

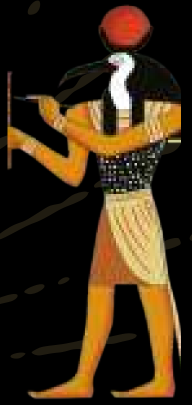
The most important of these was the Apis Bull of Memphis. Believed to house the soul of the creator god Ptah when alive, it was then worshipped as the underworld god Osiris after its death when the next bull was selected to continue the cycle. Other sacred bulls and cows were worshipped elsewhere in Egypt, with other animal cults including the sacred crocodiles of Sobek, representing the power of the king, and the sacred rams of the creator god Khnum. There were also the ibis and baboons representing the god Thoth, and the cats sacred to the feline deity Bastet. Such creatures were mummified in their millions as physical manifestations of the divine and symbols of Egypt's devotion to its creatures.



## Ptah

**God of creation and craftsmen**

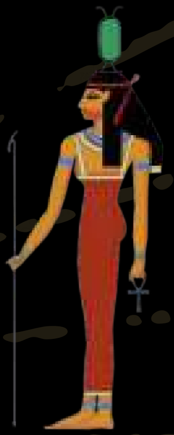
Ptah was a creator god and patron of craftsmen whose temple at Memphis, known as the 'House of Ptah's Soul' – 'hut-ka-ptah' – is the origin of the word 'Egypt'.



## Thoth

**God of learning and the moon**

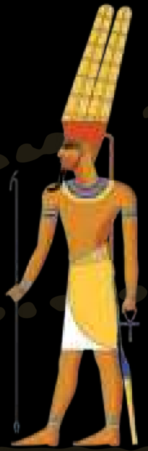
As the ibis-headed god of wisdom and patron of scribes, Thoth invented writing and brought knowledge to humans. His curved beak represented the crescent moon, and his main cult centre was Hermopolis.



## Neith

**Goddess of creation**

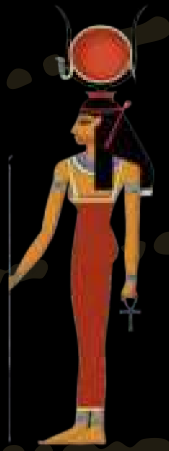
As a primeval creator deity represented by her symbol of crossed arrows and shield, warlike Neith, 'Mistress of the Bow', was worshipped at her cult centre Sais in the Delta.



## Amun

**God of Thebes**

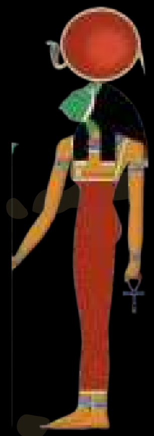
Initially the local god of Thebes, whose name means 'the hidden one', Amun was combined with the Sun god Ra to become Amun-Ra, king of the gods and Egypt's state deity.



## Hathor

**Goddess of love, beauty and motherhood**

Often represented as a cow or a woman with cow ears, Hathor symbolised pleasure and joy and as a nurturing deity protected both the living and the dead.

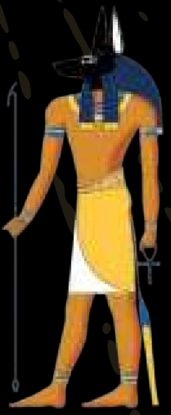


## Sekhmet

**Goddess of destruction**

The lioness goddess Sekhmet controlled the forces of destruction and was the protector of the king in battle. Her smaller, more kindly form was Bastet the cat goddess, protector of the home.

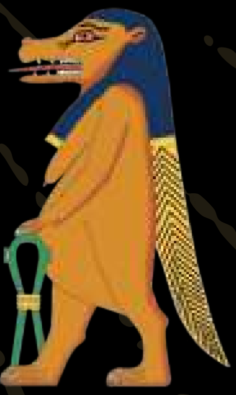
> "Gods could be portrayed in animal or human form, or as a human with an animal's head"



## Anubis

**God of embalming and the dead**

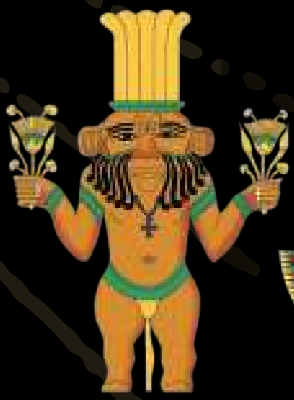
The black jackal god Anubis was the guardian of cemeteries and god of embalming, who helped judge the dead before leading their souls into the afterlife.



## Taweret

**Goddess of the home and childbirth**

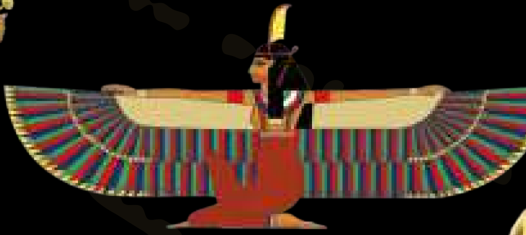
Taweret was a knife-wielding hippopotamus goddess who guarded the home, a protector of women and children who was invoked during childbirth to scare away evil forces.



## Bes

**God of the home and childbirth**

Bes was a dwarf-like god of the household who protected women and children alongside Taweret, like her carrying knives for protection, in his case he carried musical instruments for pleasure.



## Maat

**Goddess of truth and justice**

As the deity who kept the universe in balance, Maat's symbol was an ostrich feather against which the hearts of the dead were weighed and judged in order to achieve eternal life.

# Temples of the gods

## The Egyptians built temples as homes for their gods, believing their spirits resided inside their statues to which a constant stream of offerings were presented

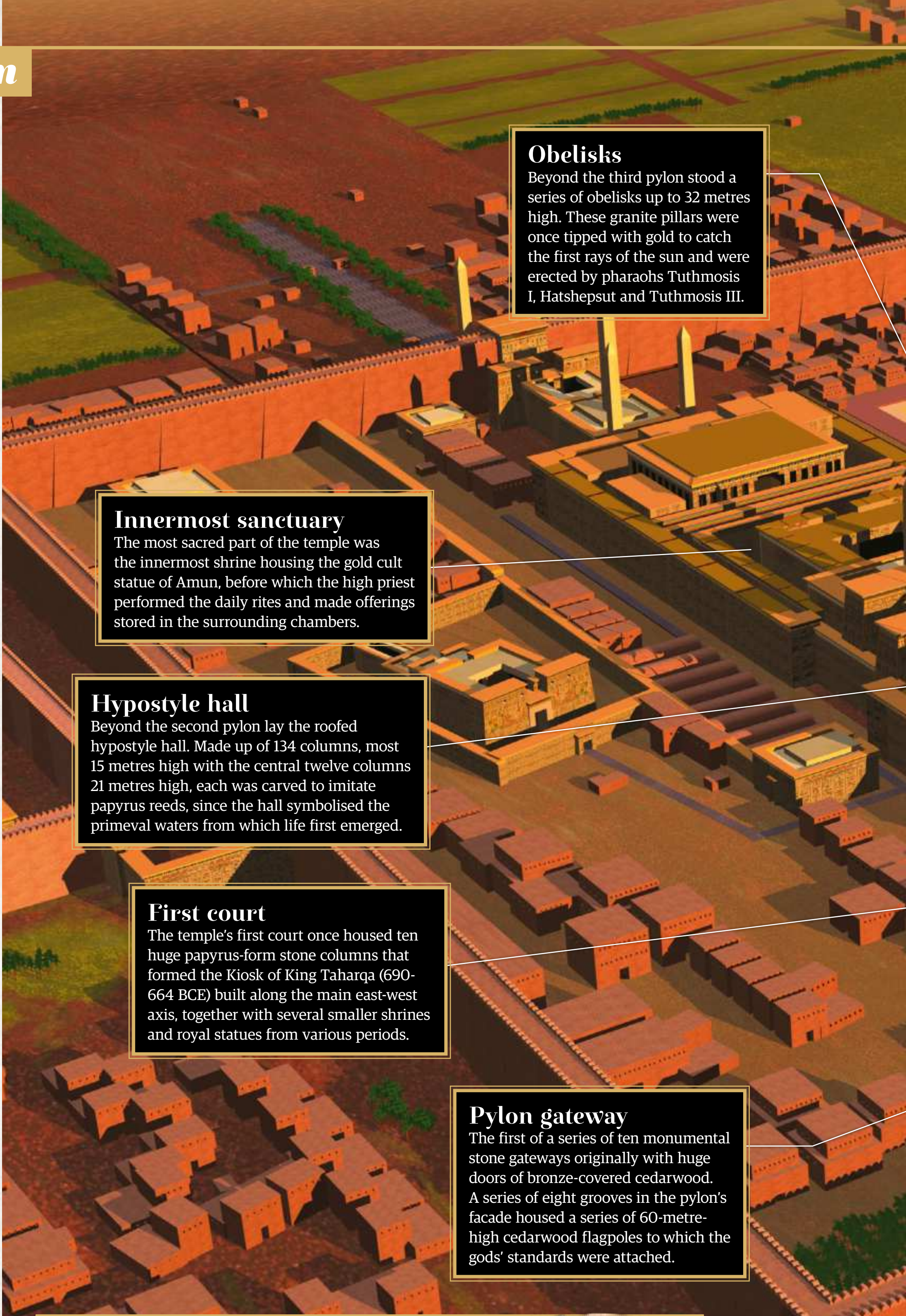
As early as c. 3500 BCE, the Egyptians built temples for their gods. Initially made of wood and reeds, these soon became permanent structures of stone that formed the centre of almost every settlement throughout the Nile Valley.

Evolving over time into ever more elaborate structures, the Egyptians aligned their temples to their environment, to the cardinal points, and to the movement of the Sun and stars.

Each temple's sacred space was also enclosed by a huge exterior wall of mud-brick, within which the temple itself was made up of a series of successive stone-built shrines and courtyards. Accessed through pylon-shaped gateways once flanked by tall cedar wood flag poles and secured by huge cedar wood doors, the temple walls were covered in brightly painted scenes of gods and kings, and like their floors and ceilings, often inlaid with precious metals and gemstones.

Then, to heighten the sense of reverence, the temple layout became progressively smaller and darker until reaching the innermost sanctuary, which housed the gods' cult statues. These were believed to contain the gods' spirits, before which daily rituals were performed to maintain the divine presence and satisfy the gods who would in turn protect Egypt. With the gods in residence, the temples became storehouses of divine power that could then be redirected through rituals for the benefit of the country.

To keep these sacred spaces ritually pure, only royalty and designated clergy were allowed inside - the majority of people were confined to the temple's outer areas, where the main administrative buildings were located. For Egypt's temple complexes were not only religious centres, but their outer precincts a combination of town hall, library, university, medical centre and law court - places where people came together for the purposes of community life at the heart of which lay the spirits of the very gods themselves.



**Obelisks**
Beyond the third pylon stood a series of obelisks up to 32 metres high. These granite pillars were once tipped with gold to catch the first rays of the sun and were erected by pharaohs Tuthmosis I, Hatshepsut and Tuthmosis III.

**Innermost sanctuary**
The most sacred part of the temple was the innermost shrine housing the gold cult statue of Amun, before which the high priest performed the daily rites and made offerings stored in the surrounding chambers.

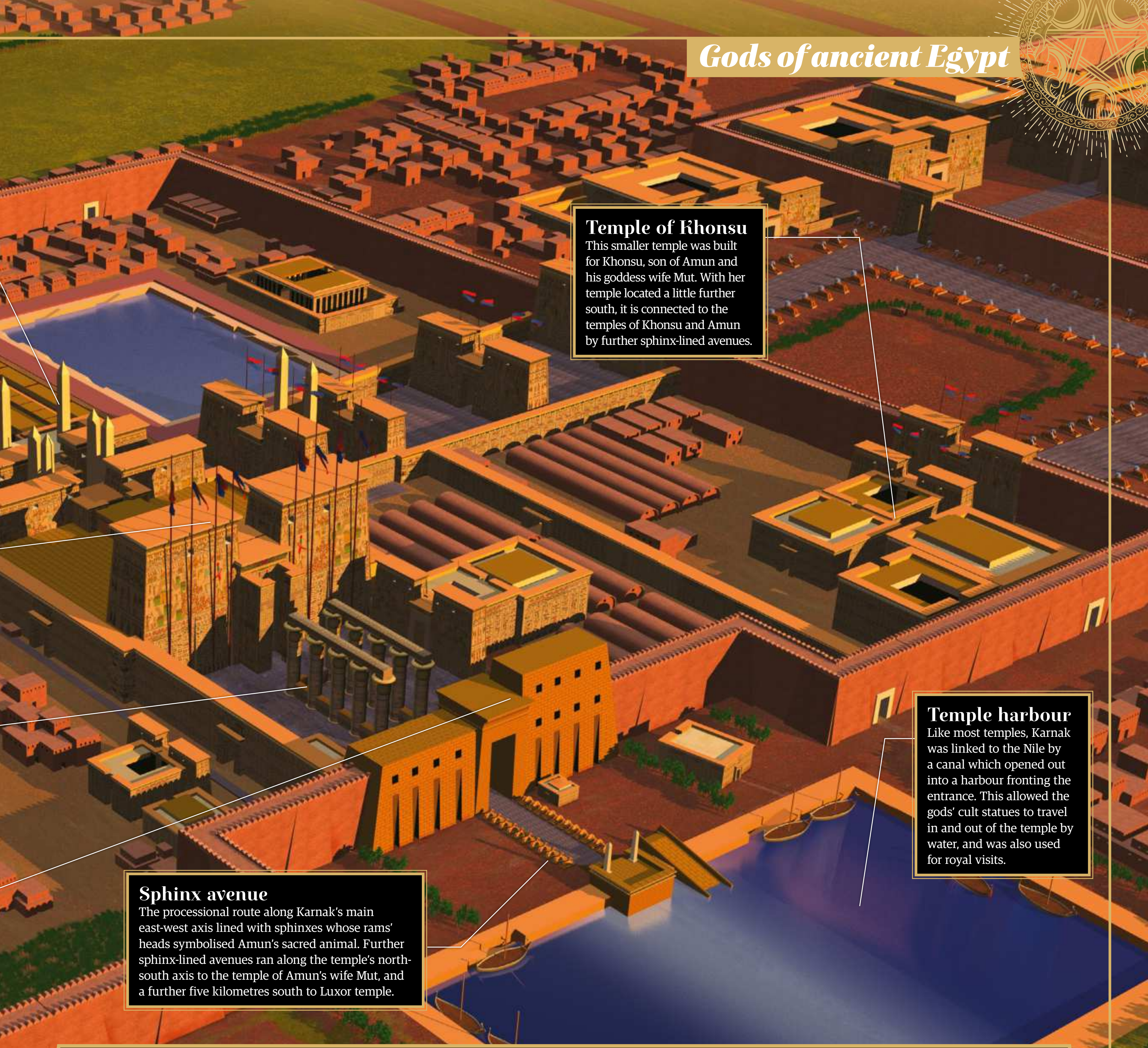
**Hypostyle hall**
Beyond the second pylon lay the roofed hypostyle hall. Made up of 134 columns, most 15 metres high with the central twelve columns 21 metres high, each was carved to imitate papyrus reeds, since the hall symbolised the primeval waters from which life first emerged.

**First court**
The temple's first court once housed ten huge papyrus-form stone columns that formed the Kiosk of King Taharqa (690-664 BCE) built along the main east-west axis, together with several smaller shrines and royal statues from various periods.

**Pylon gateway**
The first of a series of ten monumental stone gateways originally with huge doors of bronze-covered cedarwood. A series of eight grooves in the pylon's facade housed a series of 60-metre-high cedarwood flagpoles to which the gods' standards were attached.

## Worship beyond the temples

With access to Egypt's temples restricted to royalty and clergy, the temples' outer walls sometimes incorporated shrines featuring images of 'listening ears'. These allowed the gods to hear prayers from the general population, with the Amun of Karnak praised as a god 'who comes at the voice of the poor', while the goddess Hathor 'listens to the petitions of every young girl who trusts in her'. People also worshipped at home within small domestic shrines, containing small busts of deceased ancestors and statuettes of favourite gods and past monarchs. The deified queen, Ahmose-Nefertari, and her son, Amenhotep I, were more popular than Amun at the workers' village Deir el-Medina. Families within the home also used magic.



### Temple of Khonsu

This smaller temple was built for Khonsu, son of Amun and his goddess wife Mut. With her temple located a little further south, it is connected to the temples of Khonsu and Amun by further sphinx-lined avenues.

### Temple harbour

Like most temples, Karnak was linked to the Nile by a canal which opened out into a harbour fronting the entrance. This allowed the gods' cult statues to travel in and out of the temple by water, and was also used for royal visits.

### Sphinx avenue

The processional route along Karnak's main east-west axis lined with sphinxes whose rams' heads symbolised Amun's sacred animal. Further sphinx-lined avenues ran along the temple's north-south axis to the temple of Amun's wife Mut, and a further five kilometres south to Luxor temple.

## The festival calendar

**The Opening of the Year (New Year's Day)**
**Month 1, day 1 (19 July)**
The Egyptian New Year began with the start of the annual Nile flood, which brought water to the desert landscape and allowed crops to grow. With the floodwaters repeating the moment of creation, it was a time of national rejoicing when hymns claimed 'the whole land leaps for joy' and people threw flowers, offerings and even themselves into the water.

**Opet Festival**
**Month 2, days 15-26 (September)**
The Opet Festival began as an 11-day event when the cult statue of Amun was taken out of Karnak, accompanied by musicians, dancers, soldiers and the public. The procession travelled five kilometres south to the temple of Luxor, where the god's statue was joined by the pharaoh in secret ceremonies designed to replenish royal power, amidst feasting and rejoicing.

**The Festival of Khoiak**
**Month 4, days 18-30 (November)**
The Festival of Khoiak celebrated the life, death and resurrection of Osiris. Since this was based on the agricultural cycle in which the crops cut down were grown again, ceremonies included planting seeds in Osiris-shaped containers. It was celebrated when the Nile floodwaters were receding, leaving rich, black sediment on the riverbanks into which new crops were planted.

**Festival of Bastet**
**Month 8, days 4-5**
The cat goddess, Bastet, was closely linked to the lioness Sekhmet and cow-like Hathor, these deities' lively worship involving much singing, dancing and drinking – all key elements of Bastet's annual fertility festival. Boatloads of men and women would arrive at her cult centre Bubastis to celebrate, when it was reported that 'more wine is drunk at this feast than in the whole year'.

**Festival of the Valley**
**New Moon, Month 10**
At the annual Festival of the Valley, the cult statue of Amun was taken out from Karnak and across the Nile to Thebes's west bank. While it was here, the statue visited the tombs and temples of the previous kings that were buried there, accompanied by the local population, who would also visit the tombs of their own relatives to feast with their spirits and leave them food offerings.

**Festival of the Beautiful Meeting**
**New Moon, Month 11**
This festival celebrated the marriage between the god Horus of Edfu and goddess Hathor of Dendera. Beginning 14 days before the new moon, Hathor's cult statue was transported 70 kilometres south to Edfu temple, where it was placed beside the statue of Horus. 14 more days of festivities involved the participation of the royal family alongside the general population.

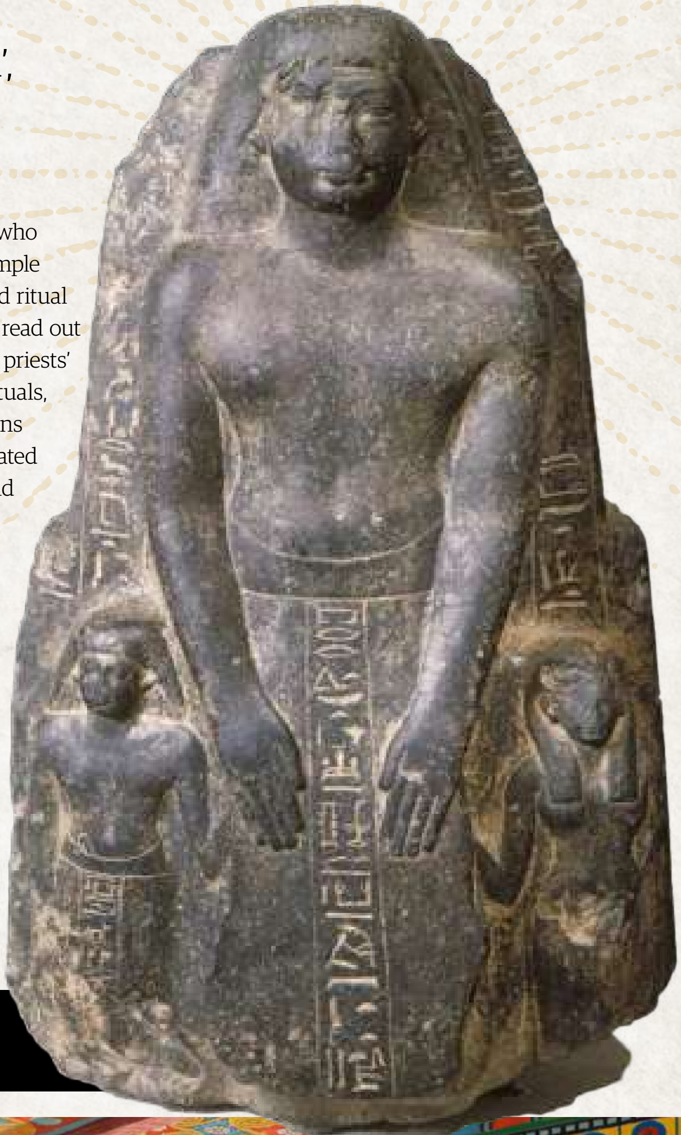
# Power of the priests

## Ancient Egypt's priests were known as 'servants of god', who carried out religious rites before the gods' statues instead of a human congregation

Each successive pharaoh was regarded as a child of the gods, and as the gods' representative on Earth, was also the supreme high priest of every temple. However, with so many different temples throughout Egypt, the pharaoh's duties had to be delegated to each temple's high priest, who was often a royal relative selected by the king to guarantee their loyalty.

Within large temples like Karnak or Memphis, the power of the priests was considerable, since the temples owned much land and the temple treasuries were very wealthy. The priests also controlled the gods' cult statues, which functioned as oracles, whose pronouncements were interpreted by the priests, and could pass judgment in legal cases and even influence royal succession. At times when the crown was weak, the high priests' powers became so great that some took on additional roles as military generals, whose struggles with the monarchy could lead to civil war.

Yet most of the time the priests carried out their role, helping the king maintain strong relations with the gods whose spirits were believed to dwell within their cult statues. Housed in the sanctuary at the innermost part of the temple, it was here that the high priest led daily rites, assisted by a staff of male and female clergy, from the 'god's wife' priestess to the deputy high priest who oversaw supplies of offerings and the temple scribes who kept accounts and composed ritual texts. There were also lector priests who read out these texts, temple astronomers or 'hour priests' who calculated the correct timings for rituals, and temple dancers, singers and musicians who entertained the gods and impersonated them in ritual dramas wearing masks and elaborate costumes. Other staff included the temple gardeners, brewers, bakers and butchers who supplied the daily offerings, the temple weavers, jewellers, barbers and wig makers who supplied both the gods and their clergy, and the numerous craftsmen, carpenters and builders who undertook building work, carried out repairs and kept the temples in good order. In fact so numerous were such personnel that eventually over 100,000 people were employed in the upkeep of Egypt's three main temples of Karnak, Memphis and Heliopolis.

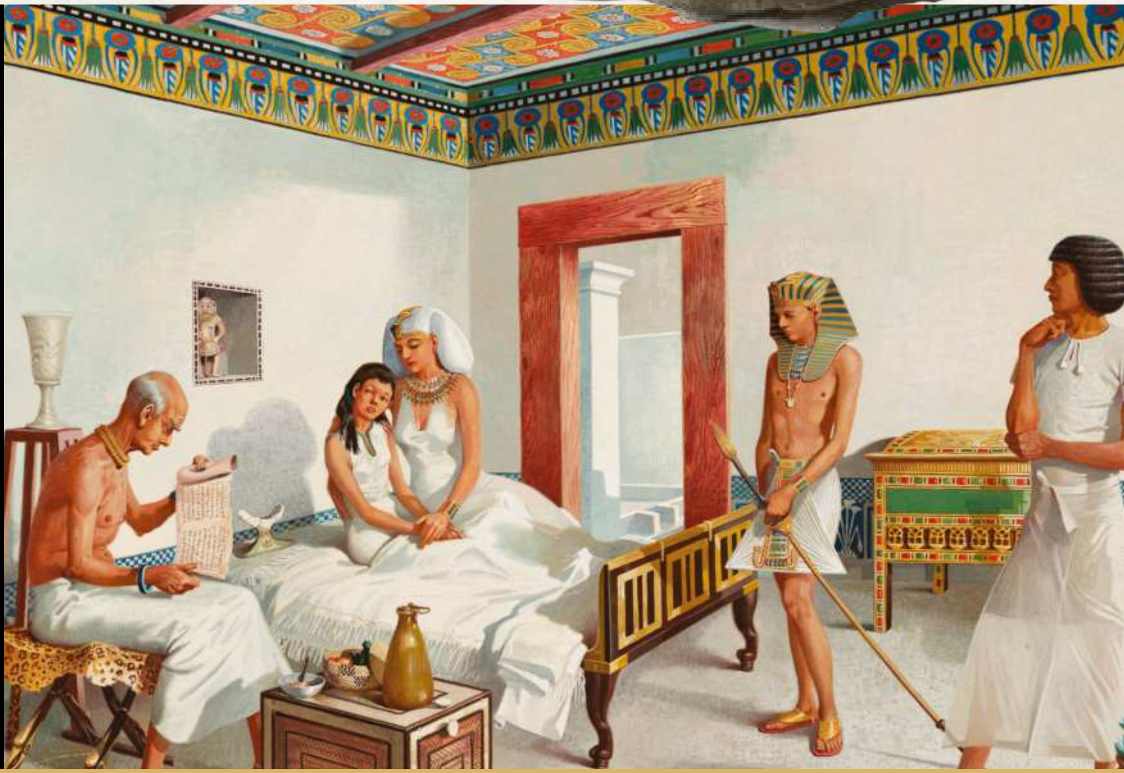


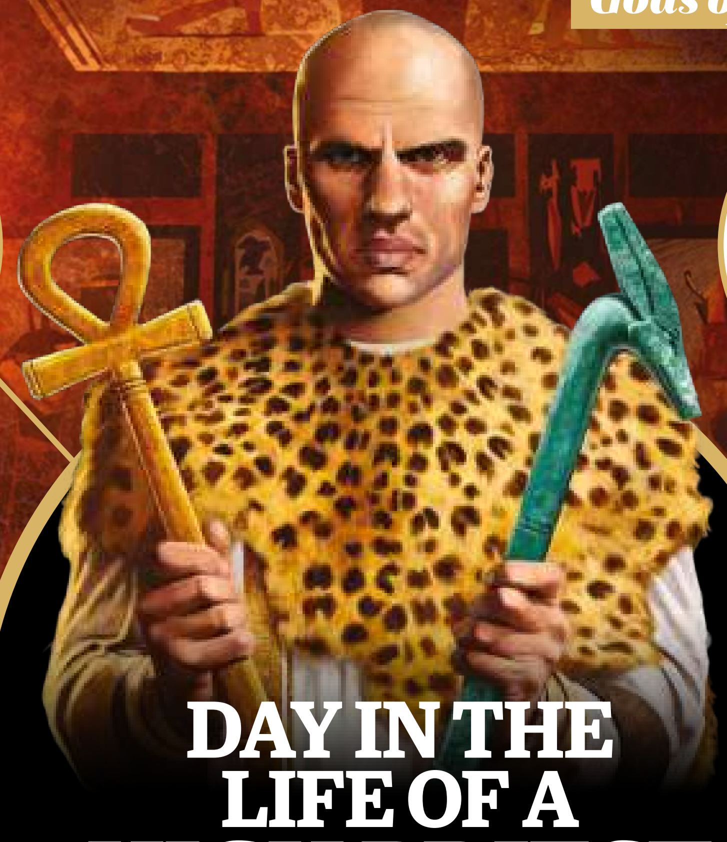
**Priest Teti with his family: Teti is in the centre with his father the smaller figure on the left, also named Teti, and his mother, Meket, on the right**

# Magic and medicine

## Ancient Egyptian religion and magic were indistinguishable, and hidden forces in both were regarded as the main cause of illness

Although most communities had part-time medical men and 'wise women', people also slept in the temple's medical centre (sanatorium) in the hope they would be cured through divinely inspired dreams. These were interpreted by the priests, some of whom were also doctors. Since goddess Sekhmet controlled the forces of disease, her priests, believed capable of calming her, were therefore doctors specialising in diseases. Priests of the scorpion goddess Selket, patron of healers, cured bites and stings, while childhood illnesses were treated by invoking the mother goddess Isis, whose magic appears in various prescriptions including 'a remedy which Isis prepared for the headache of Ra'. Even deified mortals were believed to have such powers, from the polymath Imhotep claimed as a son of the god Ptah and later identified with the Greek god of medicine Asclepius to the official Amenhotep, credited with miracle cures a thousand years after his death. In most cases, treatment involved wearing amulets, reciting magical incantations and taking medicines made from all manner of ingredients, from water poured over gods' statues to sour milk and even crocodile dung.





# DAY IN THE LIFE OF A HIGH PRIEST

The high priest's day was a series of duties performed at set times to satisfy the gods who would then keep all things in order

### Before dawn

**Ritual ablutions**

To be ritually pure, the priests bathed in the temple's sacred lake, shaved off all hair and gargled with natron salt solution, before dressing in linen robes and reed-woven sandal.

### Sunrise

**Morning ceremony**

At dawn the high priest entered the shrine and awoke the god's spirit in its statue. This was then cleansed, anointed and dressed, and offered the finest foods while frankincense was burned to purify the surroundings.

### Pre-noon

**Reversion of offerings and ritual ablutions**

Once the god had its fill of food offerings, these reverted to the priests as breakfast. Then to maintain ritual purity, the high priest bathed once again before re-entering the gods' presence.

### Noon

**Midday ceremony**

At noon, the high priest re-entered the shrine, this time burning myrrh resin while sprinkling water to further purify the temple's shrines and sacred spaces.

### Various times

**Various rituals**

With numerous rituals performed by the high priest and clergy at various times, these were not only set by the 'hour priest' astronomers but carefully measured with a clepsydra water clock.

### Evening

**Ritual ablutions**

To maintain ritual purity throughout the day, the priests had to bathe once again before re-entering the gods' presence.

### Sunset

**Evening ceremony**

In a reverse of the morning ceremony, the high priest once more entered the shrine to put the god's spirit to rest, burning spicy kyphi incense to create a restful environment.

### Night

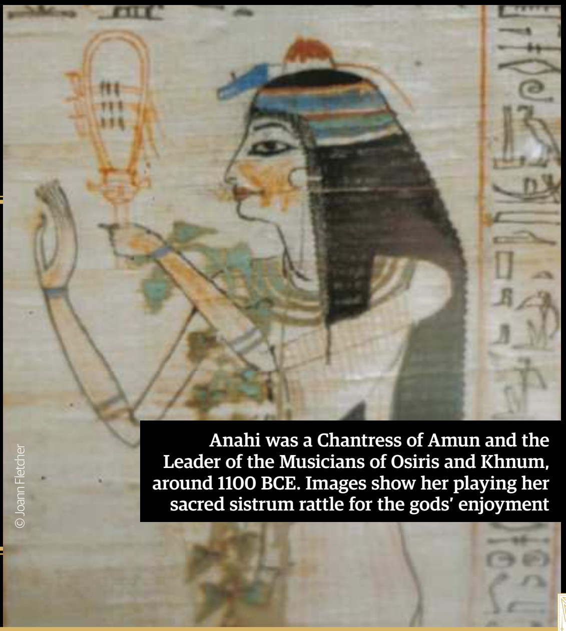
**Ritual ablutions**

Since the priests had to bathe twice a day and twice at night, a fourth bath maintained ritual purity, while the hour priest astronomers monitored the night sky from the temple roof 'observatory'.

> "The high priests' powers became so great that [it] could lead to civil war"

## Priestesses

Women were priestesses to both goddesses and gods, undertaking similar roles to their male counterparts and receiving the same pay. The most common priestess title was 'chantress', with some women impersonating goddesses in rituals and the wives of high priests holding the title 'leader of the musical troupe'. Although most high priests were men, as were the lector priests who read out sacred texts, women held both these offices at times. Yet the most important priestess was the 'God's Wife', a title held by a succession of royal women acting as the human consort of the god Amun at Karnak. The God's Wife led sacred processions with the king or his deputy the high priest, and like them could enter the innermost shrine to make offerings to keep the gods content. She also took an active role in defending Egypt by magical means, shooting arrows into ritual targets and burning images of enemies. As the role brought great wealth and prestige, kings appointed their sisters or daughters as God's Wife to enhance their own status. Eventually regarded as the equivalent of a king, shown with kingly sceptres, these women could delegate on the king's behalf, both within the temple and in matters of state.



© Joann Fletcher

**Anahi was a Chantress of Amun and the Leader of the Musicians of Osiris and Khnum, around 1100 BCE. Images show her playing her sacred sistrum rattle for the gods' enjoyment**

© Alamy, Corbis, Joe Cummings, Thinkstock, Walters Art Museum via Wikimedia Commons

# The Greeks and their religion

Ancient Greek religion was diverse, contradictory, and endlessly inventive, much like the Greeks themselves

Written by Marc DeSantis

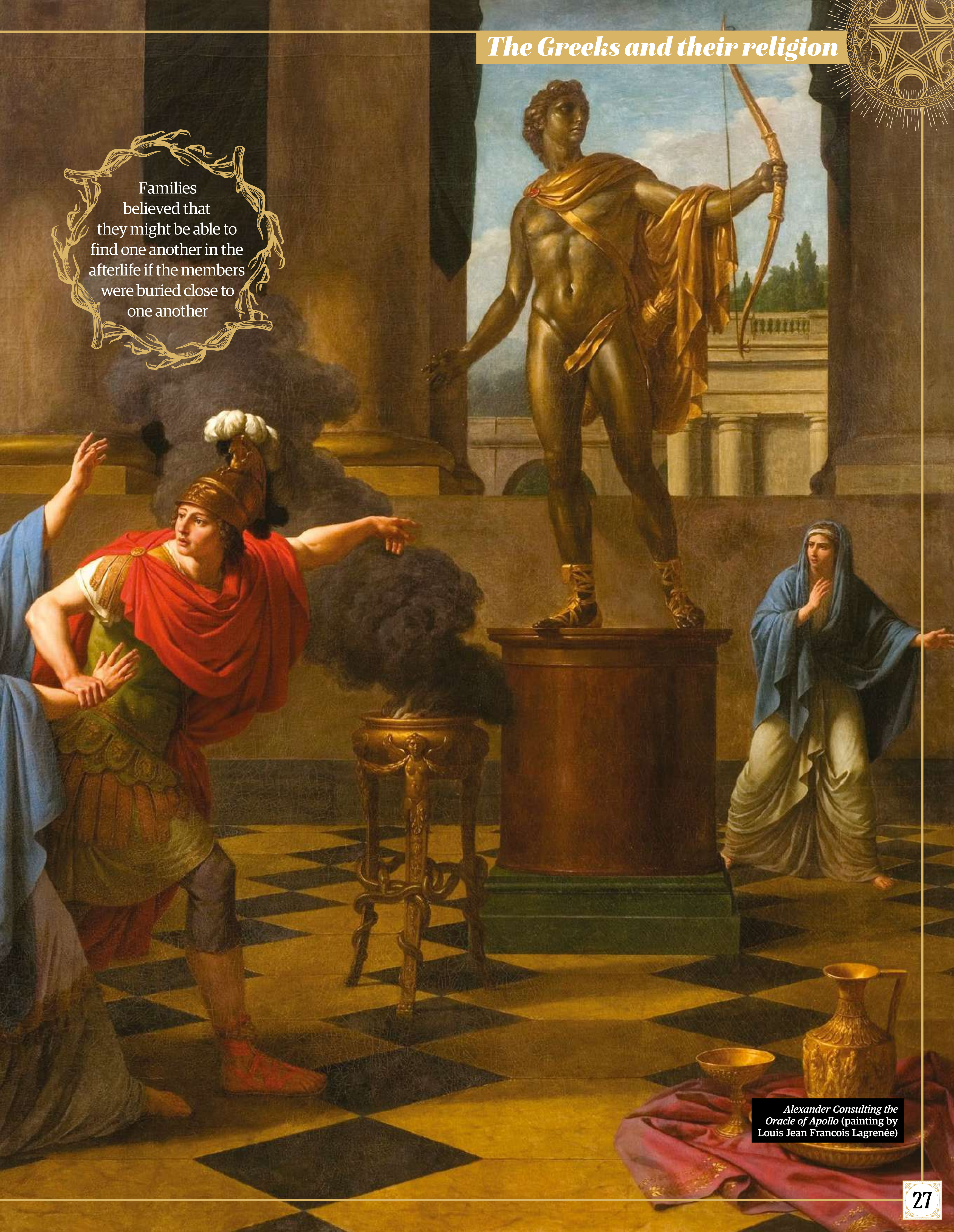
Greek religion had no formal set of beliefs or practices to which all had to conform or accept. The Greeks had their mythological stories, many of which were shared all over their country, but they did not develop a rigorous system of beliefs about them. The Greeks, for example, had no one sacred text, such as the Bible, at the core of their religion. Often Greek myths differed from place to place, as well as the particular stories told about the gods and heroes.

Sometimes these stories were wildly contradictory of others. Several gods had clearly overlapping areas of authority that could not be reconciled. Greek mythology was the product of centuries of unregulated storytelling by some of history's most creative and innovative people. Their myths explained the origins of the gods, the nature of the world in which the Greeks lived, and what they believed to be their history. If their mythology might appear to be lacking coherence at times, that is a modern judgement that would have puzzled the Greeks themselves.

Furthermore, unlike the case in modern times, the ancient Greeks lacked a concept of a clear division between the realm of religion and that of non-religious life. For them, it was a seamless whole, with the gods, of which there were many, demanding and receiving the worship and sacrifice delivered by both the state and by private individuals regularly.

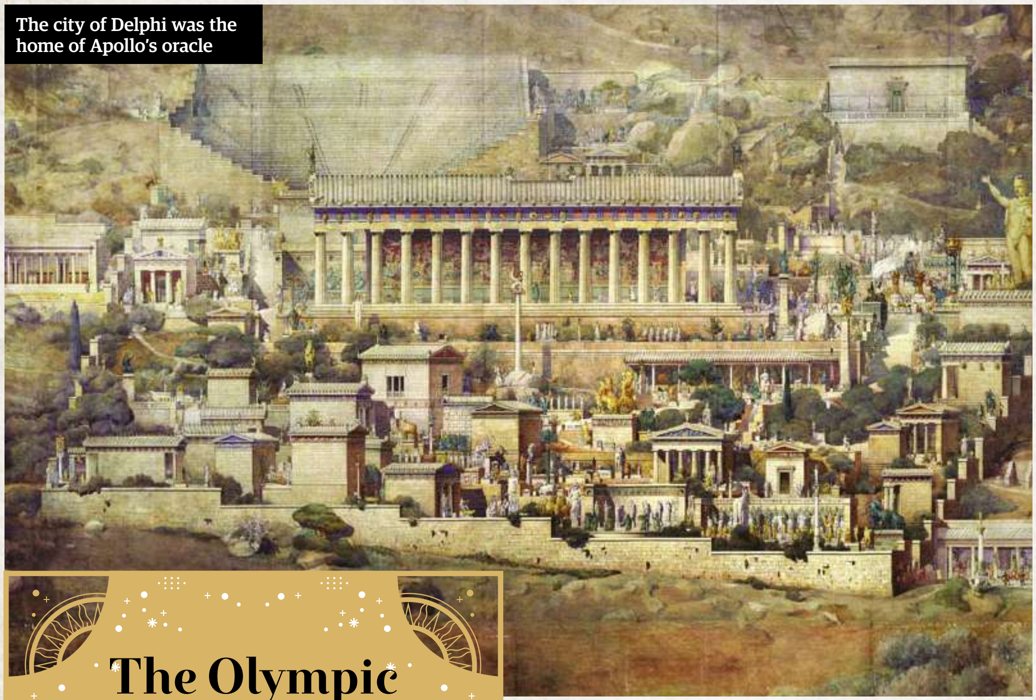
In fact, the Greeks had no specific word for 'religion' as we might understand it. Religion was simply part of their everyday life. Rituals were conducted at all important public and private events and a deity was routinely consulted before any major undertaking. A fortunate result in one's life was often responded to with a votive offering to a god, vows of thanks, or some other public form of recognition of the particular deity to whom success was owed.

There were 12 major gods and goddesses of the Greeks. These were the Olympians, so named because they reside atop Mount Olympus. Zeus was the lord and master of them all. Hera, his wife (and sister) was his queen. With him also was Aphrodite, goddess of love, bright Apollo, and his virgin sister Artemis the Huntress. Demeter, goddess of growing things, was there also. Athena there was, the goddess of wisdom and patroness of heroes. Hephaestus too was an Olympian. He was the lame but matchless smith of the gods. Hermes was Zeus'



Families believed that they might be able to find one another in the afterlife if the members were buried close to one another

*Alexander Consulting the Oracle of Apollo* (painting by Louis Jean Francois Lagrenée)



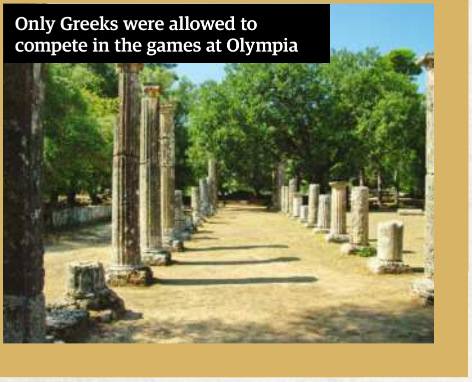
The city of Delphi was the home of Apollo's oracle

## The Olympic Games

One festival that was attended by Greeks of all the cities was the Olympia in honour of Zeus Olympios (of Mount Olympus). First recorded as taking place in 776 BCE at Olympia, the Olympic Games were held every four years and only the Greeks were allowed to attend them. The games initially involved just one event, a foot race, but over time, several other competitions were added to the Olympic programme for the competitors.

Though it was an athletic competition, the religious nature of the festival was always present. The Olympia began with sacrifices and prayers offered to Zeus. Next, all of the competitors swore an oath before Zeus' altar and statue. Breaking this oath might result in a stiff fine or disqualification. There were then two further public sacrifices, with one conducted on the day of the full moon and the second on the last day of the festival.

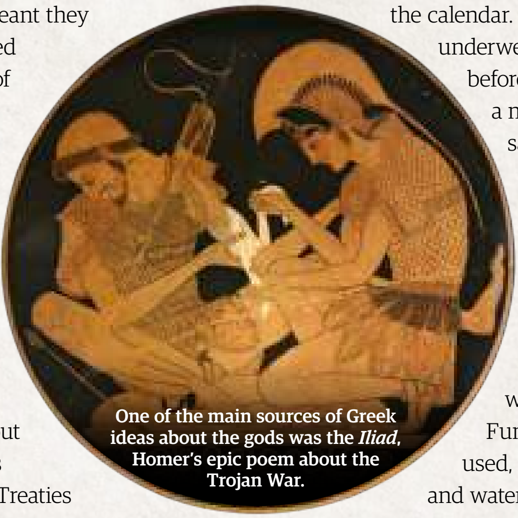
While the games were being held, all of the states of Greece were bound to observe an armistice. This sacred truce was implemented so that competitors and others travelling to watch the games could attend them without fear of harm befalling them.



Only Greeks were allowed to compete in the games at Olympia

fleet-footed messenger. Brutal Ares was the lord of war, while Poseidon was the god of the sea and its creatures. Rounding out the Olympian pantheon was Dionysus, the god of wine and revelry. Dionysus was a later addition; earlier pantheons instead feature hearthfire goddess Hestia.

In addition to the mighty Olympians, the Greeks had hundreds of lesser deities. Having so many gods of their own meant they were relatively open-minded when it came to the gods of non-Greeks. They readily identified or equated foreign gods with similar ones of their own. They had no cause to deny the existence of anyone else's gods. The easy-going attitude toward the deities of foreign peoples did not mean the Greeks were unserious about religion. Religious practices were taken very seriously. Treaties between city-states were solemnised by oaths sworn by the gods as well as sacrifices. Breaking such a treaty might bring about a disaster.



One of the main sources of Greek ideas about the gods was the *Iliad*, Homer's epic poem about the Trojan War.

The gods of the Greeks had their own priests and priestesses. These men and women oversaw the rites performed in honour of the gods and tended their temples, shrines, and sanctuaries. They did not involve themselves with the spiritual concerns of the worshippers. There was little in the way of formal doctrine for priests to know or follow. There were several features to worship that all Greeks had in common.

> "There were 12 major gods and goddesses of the Greeks. These were the Olympians"

## PRAYING

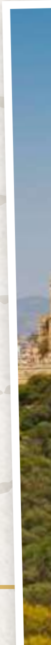
Prayers were the usual means by which people communicated with the gods. The primary parts of a prayer were the invocation, in which the person called upon the deity using his name, title, and abode; the argument, in which the supplicant gave reasons to the god as to why he should help, which might include a recitation of good deeds performed by the mortal or making a note that the god was known for his helpfulness; and the prayer itself, which was a request for some kind of divine aid. Many kinds of relief might be sought, such as an end to sickness or drought.

## PURIFICATION

The cleansing of the community from pollution (or miasma), was of enormous importance to the Greeks. Private individuals might be purified by washing. Often purification was undertaken before some important action or perhaps as required by the calendar. The Athenian Assembly underwent ritual purification before the beginning of a meeting by having a sacrificed piglet carried around the members. Sometimes a community might undergo a mass purification driving out human scapegoats. Ritual purification could be effected by washing or sprinkling. Fumigation was also used, along with seawater and water drawn from a sacred spring. Sacrifices would also suffice for purification, with the blood of the victim used to wash away the pollution of an unclean person.

## SACRIFICES

Sacrifices were of vast importance in Greek worship. Both animals and vegetables were seen as appropriate sacrifices to the gods. With animals, the victim was brought to the altar of a god in a procession where it was sprinkled with water. These drops caused the animal to nod, which to the Greek mind was its acceptance of its sacrifice.



Hair was then cut from the animal and a prayer was said to indicate what the sacrificer wished for in return for the sacrifice. The animal was dispatched via a cut to the throat and its meat divided out into portions. The first was for the god. The second, the entrails, were roasted and eaten by the participants of the sacrifice. The rest of the meat was then boiled and given out to those present at the ritual.

## FESTIVALS

Festivals were important parts of Greek public religion. Hundreds of public religious festivals were held every year by the various communities of ancient Greece. About one in every three days of the year was devoted to a festival of one kind or another. Though particular practices and the deities most prominently honoured might vary from city to city, religion was a central element that served to distinguish Greeks from non-Greeks.

The basic features of a festival were the procession, the sacrifice, and the feast. Outside of these, local practices could differ widely. Most festivals owed their origins to agricultural rituals carried out to ensure a bountiful harvest. They were typically held seasonally, with the Thesmophoria held in honour of Demeter, mostly taking place in the autumn.

Another important festival was the Great Dionysia held annually in Athens. Athens was particularly fond of festivals, and was said to have held twice as many as any other city in Greece. Plays formed an important part of the Dionysia, with four days devoted to such presentations, three for tragedies and the fourth and last was reserved for comedies.

## ORACLES

As might be imagined, with sickness and death ever-present in ancient times, the Greeks were often very anxious about the future. The reasonable desire for reassurance led many to seek out advice from the gods, which was obtained through their oracles. There were ten such oracles who foretold the future, after a fashion, for mortal men. Foremost among these was the oracle of Delphi, where the Pythia, a priestess of Apollo, delivered her pronouncements on behalf of the god. In words attributed to Apollo himself, the very purpose of the construction of his temple there was so that he could give 'unfailing advice through prophetic responses' in it. Another famous oracular shrine was that of Zeus found at Dodona in Epirus. Questions put to the god's oracle were often very personal, such as whether the supplicant should get married or make a voyage across the sea. The response was usually simply yes or no.

Sometimes the answers could be more complicated and have major consequences. Right before the mighty Persians invaded Greece for a second time in 480 BCE, the Athenians consulted the oracle at Delphi. The Athenians knew that their situation was dire, and some were even considering packing up and leaving for safety in Italy. The historian Herodotus tells us that the priestess Aristonice told them that 'only the wooden wall shall not fall.' This baffling response was open to many interpretations, but Themistocles, the leading man at Athens, cleverly interpreted this to mean that they would have to rely on their navy, the ships themselves being made of wood, to fend off the Persians. The Athenians would go on to lead the combined Greek fleet to a great naval victory at Salamis soon afterward.

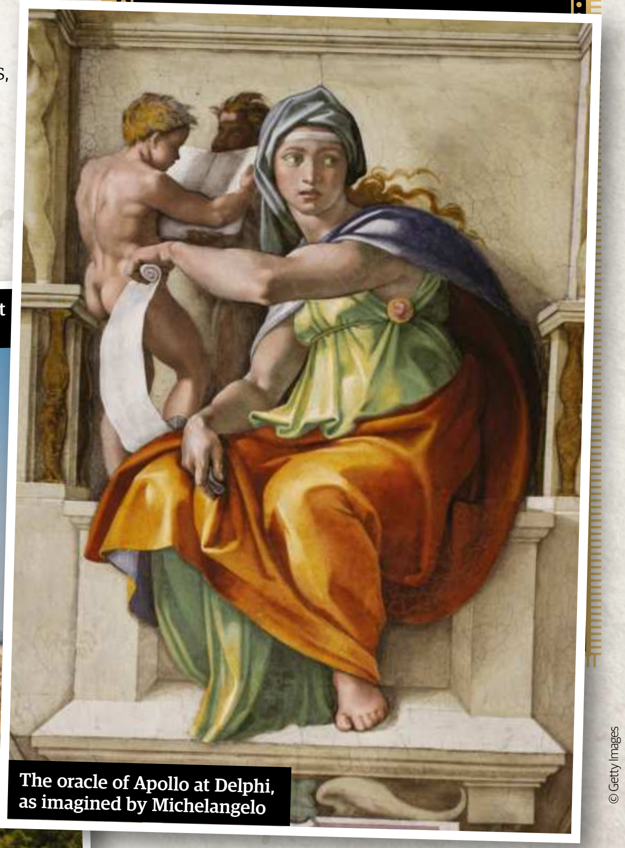
> Apollo's oracle at Delphi continued to offer pronouncements until the shrine was destroyed by the invading Heruli in 267 CE

## Crossing over

The Greeks believed that the dead needed help in crossing the boundary between the world of the living and Hades, the gloomy realm of the dead. Those left behind sought to bury the dead as quickly as they could, or else the unburied dead would be condemned to roam for many years along the banks of the Styx, the river that marked the boundary between them and Hades.

The retrieval of the bodies of the dead and their proper burial was of tremendous importance to the living. In 405 BCE, ten Athenian admirals won a great naval victory at Arginusae but failed to collect the corpses of their slain sailors on account of a storm that came up suddenly. On their return to Athens they were put on trial for dereliction of duty despite having won the battle. Several of the admirals were executed.

Within days of death, the body was to be buried, with the corpse being carried to the place of burial. Both bodily burial and cremation were available, with cremation thought to be more prestigious. The ashes of the dead were placed in an urn which was itself then buried. Most Athenian burials took place on the roads leading out of the city. Burials inside the city were not allowed because of a wish to avoid pollution by the dead. After interment, the graves were not forgotten, but were tended to regularly by the surviving relatives, especially by the women of the family.



The oracle of Apollo at Delphi, as imagined by Michelangelo

The Parthenon was the great temple of Athena in Athens

© Getty Images

# The Twelve Olympians

The gods of Olympus were a fractious family of glorious, majestic, scheming and treacherous deities

## Zeus

### Lord of Olympus

Mighty Zeus was the lord and king of the Olympian gods, and father of many gods and heroes. His domain was the sky and he was master of the weather. His animal was the eagle, the greatest of all birds. Zeus was the most powerful of all the gods – perhaps even stronger than all of them put together – yet he was not invincible, and he could not defy the wishes of his divine brethren with impunity.

Zeus oversaw oaths and hospitality, while his divine radiance was enough to burn mere mortals to ashes. He also had a roving eye and would have many amorous trysts with nymphs and other women who were not his wife. Through Danaë he would father the hero Perseus, slayer of serpent-crowned Medusa; Heracles, destined to become a demigod on Olympus; and Helen, the most beautiful woman of all. Zeus had many other dalliances, and Hera, his wife, would seek vengeance for her humiliation by afflicting them.

## Hermes

### Messenger of the gods

Son of Zeus by the nymph Maia, Hermes was the god of messengers and travellers. He acted to guide others to their destinations. In the *Iliad*, he brings King Priam of Troy through the Greek lines to meet with Achilles to recover the body of his slain son, Hector. When Hera, Athena and Aphrodite needed to find their way to Mount Ida to participate in the Judgment of Paris, it was Hermes who led them to their destination. It was also Hermes who conducted Persephone out of the Underworld and to Demeter in the world of the living.

## Poseidon

### Lord of the sea

Poseidon was the full brother of Zeus and son of Cronus. When the three brothers, Zeus, Poseidon and Hades, overthrew their father, Poseidon took the sea as his realm. Like the sea, Poseidon could be placid one moment and raging the next, and his weapon and symbol of authority was the three-pronged trident. The vengeful Poseidon ensured that the Greek hero Odysseus would be delayed for years in returning to his home island of Ithaca for his blinding of the sea god's son, the Cyclops. He was responsible for earthquakes, and was known as Earth-shaker among Greeks.

## Dionysus

### God of wine and revelry

Dionysus was the god of wine and vine. The son of Zeus by the mortal woman Semele, worship of him by his devotees was among the most startling of all the Greek gods. Women figured prominently in his cult. The leaders, known as maenads, partook in ecstatic, sometimes violent, rituals in which they engaged in frenzied dancing and tore wild animals to pieces. Greek women would attend his ceremonies by going into the hills to engage in processions led by the maenads. There they would drink themselves to stupefaction in the Bacchanalia.

## Athena

### Goddess of wisdom and war

Athena, goddess of wisdom, was the daughter of Zeus by the goddess Metis. The bright goddess was the deity of civilisation, as well as a patroness of many Greek heroes. In the *Iliad*, we find her siding with the Greeks against the Trojans during their ten-year war in which she directly intervened to help them. One significant form of assistance comes at the beginning of the Iliad where she restrains the warrior Achilles from killing Agamemnon. In the *Odyssey*, we see her helping another favourite, Odysseus, make his way from Troy to Ithaca.

Athena was also the patron deity of Athens, the greatest of all Greek cities. In the 5th century BCE, the Athenians would build the Parthenon, the most magnificent of all temples, dedicated to her.

The goddess was noble in aspect and demeanour, but could be harsh to those who displeased her. Tiresias had the misfortune to espy her while she bathed, and she struck the poor man blind for his transgression against the gods.

## Hera

### Queen of the gods

Glorious Hera was both the wife and sister of Zeus, and queen of the gods. Her purview was marriage and motherhood, but despite her position as wife to Zeus, she was hardly the happiest of spouses. Her husband's philandering ways made her extremely jealous and she had a particular hatred for Heracles, Zeus's son by the mortal woman Alcmene. Hera constantly sought to avenge her humiliation by Zeus by afflicting Heracles, who had really done her no harm. She despatched snakes to kill the boy when he was just an infant, but she found her murderous plan thwarted when little Heracles killed them both. She later made him go mad, and while he was insane, he killed his wife and children.

Hera could be murderously jealous of Zeus's lovers themselves, too. She persuaded Semele, the mother of the god Dionysus, to insist that Zeus appear to her in his full divine splendour. Reluctantly, he did so, and the poor woman was reduced to ash by his overpowering radiance.

## Demeter

### The goddess of growing things

The goddess of the earth, motherhood, fertility and the harvest was known as Demeter. As the ultimate source of the grain that the Greeks used to make their bread, she was enormously important to them. Her main festival was the Thesmophoria, held every autumn to ensure a good harvest. Demeter figures prominently in the explanation for the seasons, and thus the annual cycles of birth, life, death, and rebirth seen in the natural world. The story begins when Hades, lord of the Underworld kingdom that also bore his name, stole the goddess's daughter Persephone.

## Apollo

### God of music, healing and prophecy

Handsome Apollo had his two main cult centres in Greece at Delphi and on the island of Delos. Delphi was home to his chief oracle and priestess, the Pythia, also known as the Oracle of Delphi. There at his shrine she would receive petitioners seeking to question her about the future. The weapon of Apollo was the bow. When his priest Chryses was mistreated by the Greeks at Troy, he struck down many of them with plague-carrying arrows. He was also said to pull the Sun behind him in his airborne chariot, and was sometimes given the name Phoebus, meaning 'bright'.

## Hephaestus

### The smith of Olympus

Hephaestus was the great smith of the pantheon. Unlike the other deities, who were physically perfect, Hephaestus was lame, and was thus the epitome of the outsider among the gods. He was cruelly mocked by the other gods for his deformity though they admired the products of his hands as he was the patron of all who worked with metal. Learning that his faithless wife Aphrodite was making love to Ares, he made a magic net that fell upon them while they were abed. Thus trapped, he summoned the other Olympians to view and mock the adulterous pair.

## Artemis

### Virgin goddess of the hunt

Artemis was the twin sister of Apollo and daughter of Zeus by Leto. She was a virgin huntress – often depicted carrying a bow and arrows – and also the patroness of women undergoing childbirth. Being the goddess of virginity and a protector of young girls, she fiercely guarded her own modesty. When the unlucky hunter Actaeon stumbled upon her while she was bathing in a sacred spring, the goddess, outraged at having been seen unclothed, turned him into a stag for his transgression. His own hounds promptly tore him limb from limb.

## Ares

### God of war

War in all its fearsome brutality was represented by Ares. He was the son of Zeus by his queen, Hera, but was little liked by his father and the other gods. The Greeks themselves had little love for the deity on account of the horrors that war brought with it.

One goddess that did favour Ares, though, was Aphrodite, the love goddess, with whom he fathered four children, but she was at the time already married to Hephaestus. Two of these children were Phobos (Fear) and Deimos (Terror), each representing concepts closely associated with war.

## Aphrodite

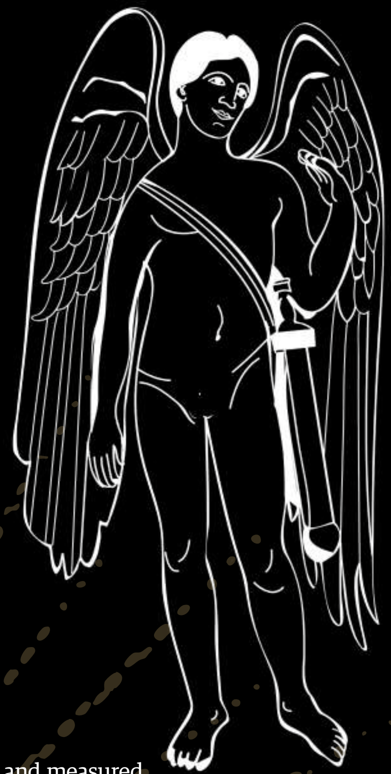
### Goddess of love

The goddess of love and beauty, Aphrodite was born out of the sea foam when Cronus tossed the severed genitals of Uranus into the waves, though another myth gives her a less gruesome birth and makes her the daughter of Zeus and the goddess Dione. Her major cult centre was Cyprus, where she is said to have been born. Oddly, the loveliest of goddesses was married to the ugliest of gods, Hephaestus the lame smith of Olympus. She was not faithful to him, and was once caught naked in bed with Ares, the god of war, by a magic net fashioned by her cuckolded and outraged husband.

Aphrodite figured prominently in the start of the Trojan War. When she, Hera and Athena each sought to claim the title of most beautiful, they had Paris, the son of the king of Troy, choose between them. Hera offered him power, Athena promised victory, but Aphrodite told him that she would make the most beautiful woman in the world his own.

# Divinities of death

With few exceptions, the divine inhabitants of the Underworld were strange, cold, dark, unlovable and terrifying, but they all had a role to play



## Hades

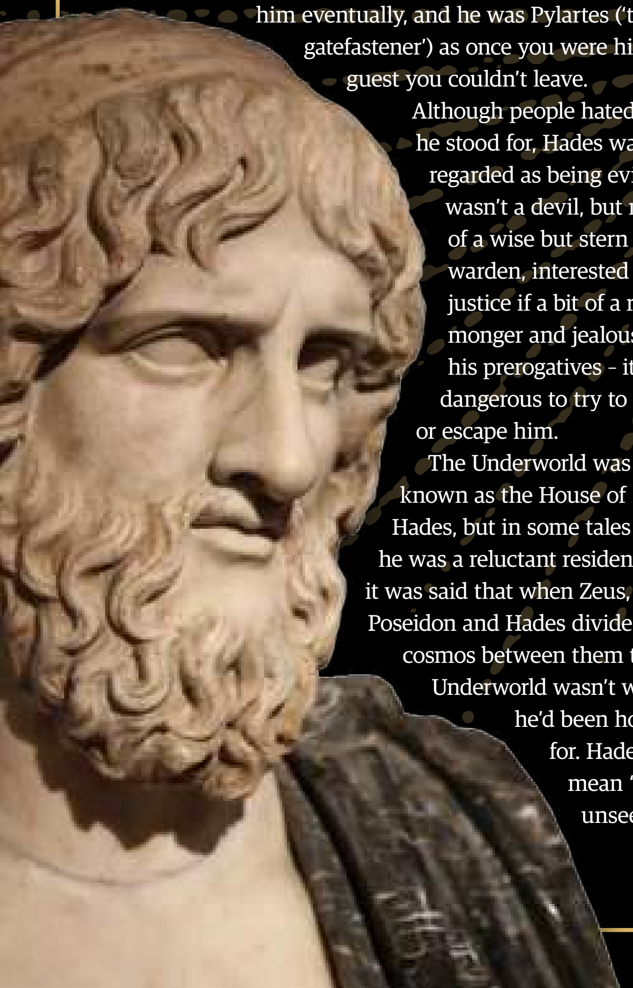
### Ruler of the Underworld

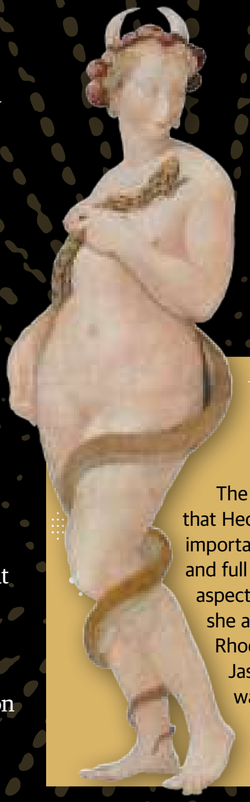
As the brother and equal of Zeus and Poseidon, and the lord of the Underworld and king of the dead, Hades was among the grandest of the Olympian gods, but he was not often worshipped or invoked, and he rarely took centre stage in stories. In fact, Greeks disliked even saying his name, which was thought to be unlucky. They used all sorts of alternatives and euphemisms to avoid it.

Among other things, he was Pluto ('the rich') because as a god of the earth he helped make crops grow, hoarded precious metals and minerals, and was a creator of wealth, while with some bitter irony he was Polydegmon ('the hospitable') as all humankind came to him eventually, and he was Pylartes ('the gatefastener') as once you were his guest you couldn't leave.

Although people hated what he stood for, Hades wasn't regarded as being evil. He wasn't a devil, but more of a wise but stern prison warden, interested in justice if a bit of a rule-monger and jealous of his prerogatives – it was dangerous to try to cheat or escape him.

The Underworld was known as the House of Hades, but in some tales he was a reluctant resident; it was said that when Zeus, Poseidon and Hades divided the cosmos between them the Underworld wasn't what he'd been hoping for. Hades may mean 'the unseen'.





## Thanatos

### Fetcher of souls

When the thread spun, cut and measured by the Moirai came to an end, Thanatos ('death') would come for you. He was the personification of death, the Greeks' Grim Reaper.

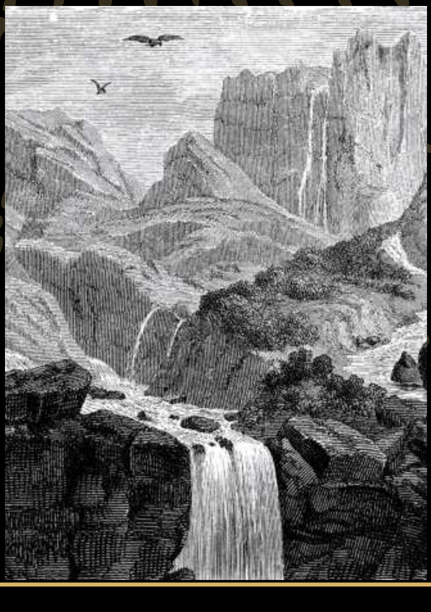
The son of Nyx ('night') and the brother of Hypnos ('sleep'), he was almost impossible to cheat, and it was perilous to try. Heracles, as always, was the exception, and was the only person to beat death. Although Sisyphus succeeded in tricking Thanatos, he later suffered everlasting torment as punishment.

## Hecate

### Goddess of fertility and witchcraft

The ancient poet Hesiod thought that Hecate was one of the most important divinities, benevolent and full of gifts. This was her in her aspect as fertility goddess. When she appeared in Apollonius of Rhodes' version of the tale of Jason and the Argonauts, she was the dread goddess.

To an extent this demonstrates the association the Greeks made between the Underworld, death and fertility, which makes a certain sense. It's also a good example of the variety and contradictions of their myths.Hecate was linked with infernal magic, necromancy, ghosts, herb lore and poison, favouring the night and places thought of as no man's land. However, Hecate was said to have been a sympathetic friend to Demeter and Persephone, who she helped guide to and from Hades. Hecate is accompanied by nymphs called Lampads, who carry lit torches.



## Styx

### Goddess of the river

Styx ('abomination') lived in a silver-pillared palace in the Underworld, and was much respected by Zeus after she aided him in the war against the Titans. She was the ruler of the River Styx, which flowed from Mount Chelmos in Arcadia down into the Underworld, where it ran nine times round the kingdom of the dead. As a mark of respect, Zeus proclaimed that no oath sworn by the waters of Styx should ever be broken, and even divine oathbreakers were severely punished. Styx was said to be a daughter of Oceanus and Tethys.

## Nyx

### Goddess of night

Among the most ancient of Greek deities, Nyx ('night') was born of primordial Chaos. She was the mother of some of the most fundamental - and often terrible - gods and goddesses, many of them without male intervention. These included some of the Underworld's most important divine inhabitants, not least Thanatos, and deities who were related to death in various ways, such as Hypnos ('sleep'), Oneiroi ('dreams'), Nemesis ('retribution'), Moros ('fate'), Ker ('doom') and Geras ('old age'). Nyx successfully defied Zeus when he wanted to expel Hypnos from Olympus, and was not to be trifled with.

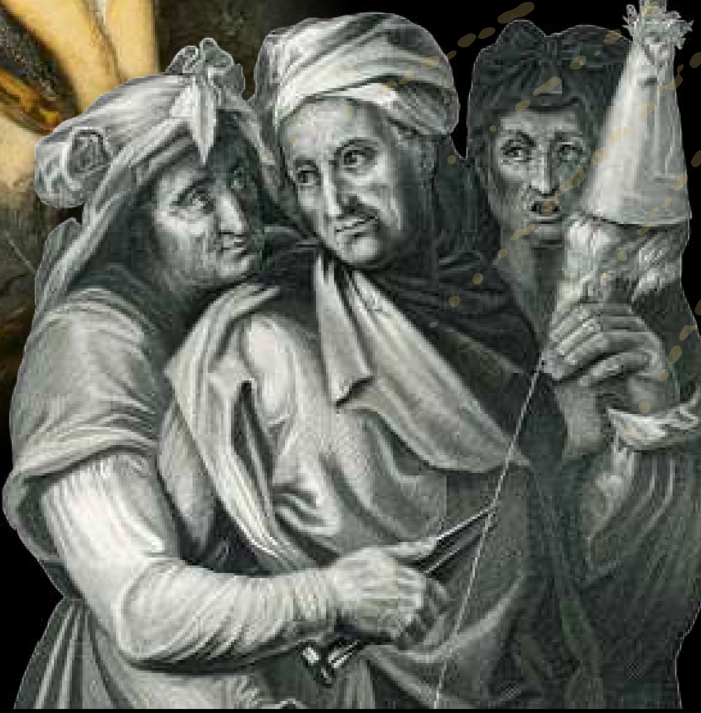
## Persephone

### Queen of the Underworld

The daughter of Zeus and Demeter, Persephone was originally a grain goddess, like her mother. She became an eminent, if part-time, resident of the Underworld after she was abducted by Hades.

Having persuaded his brother Zeus - but not his sister Demeter - that he should marry Persephone, Hades seized her in his chariot and took her to the Underworld. When Demeter eventually found her abducted daughter, she was told that she could only bring her back if she hadn't eaten anything while in the House of Hades, but Persephone had eaten some pomegranate seeds. Zeus then pronounced a compromise settlement in which Persephone would marry Hades and live with him as queen of the Underworld for either four or six months a year - the stories vary - and then spend the remainder of her time in the upper realm. In the other myths in which she features, Persephone gives no sign that she objects to being queen of the dead, and she and Hades act together.

Persephone is one of the most allegorical divinities, with her time in the Underworld symbolising the temporary death of winter, and her time in the upper world symbolising the return of fertility every year.



## The Moirai

### Guardians of destiny

Could anyone or anything stand up to, or even overrule Zeus? Possibly the Moirai ('allotters'), depending on who you listen to. The Moirai - generally called the Fates - were much older than the gods of Olympus, and were believed to determine, or at least record and supervise, personal destiny and things to come. When you were born, they would measure out your allotted lifespan and your fortune. Although it's not always clear and is sometimes contradictory in the myths, they didn't seem to make decisions; what they said was instead an impersonal expression of order and balance in the universe. Nor is it clear whether the gods were wholly subordinate to their rulings or could change fate - there are examples of both.Clotho ('she who spins'), Lachesis ('disposer of lots') and Atropos ('inevitable') were often pictured as old women, with one spinning out a thread for each person's life, one cutting it and one measuring it. The symbolism is clear enough, however ambiguous their role. In one story Apollo was said to have got round them by getting them drunk.

## CHARON

### The cantankerous boatman

The son of Erebus ('darkness') and Nyx ('night'), Charon received the souls of the newly dead, and conveyed them across the River Styx (or possibly Acheron) into the House of Hades. His reputation was as a squalid, grasping, ill-tempered old man. Although his occupation as a ferryman was regarded as being menial, he was important and had to be treated with respect; if you didn't pay his fee of an obol you would linger at the far shore of Styx/Acheron forever. Thus Greeks were always buried with a coin in their mouths, unless they were both penniless and friendless.

Charon served a symbolic purpose: no matter what your station had been in life, however rich and glorious you had been, all you could bring with you to the land of the dead was the fee for your passage into the House of Hades, and you had to pay that to a peevish old man of lowly station, who had you in his power.

Charon didn't always have his own way; Hercules forced him to ferry him across the Styx, after which Hades punished him by putting him in chains for a year.

# Ancient Roman religion

The Romans ruled an empire but were ruled by a pantheon of gods who controlled every aspect of their lives

Written by Ben Gazur

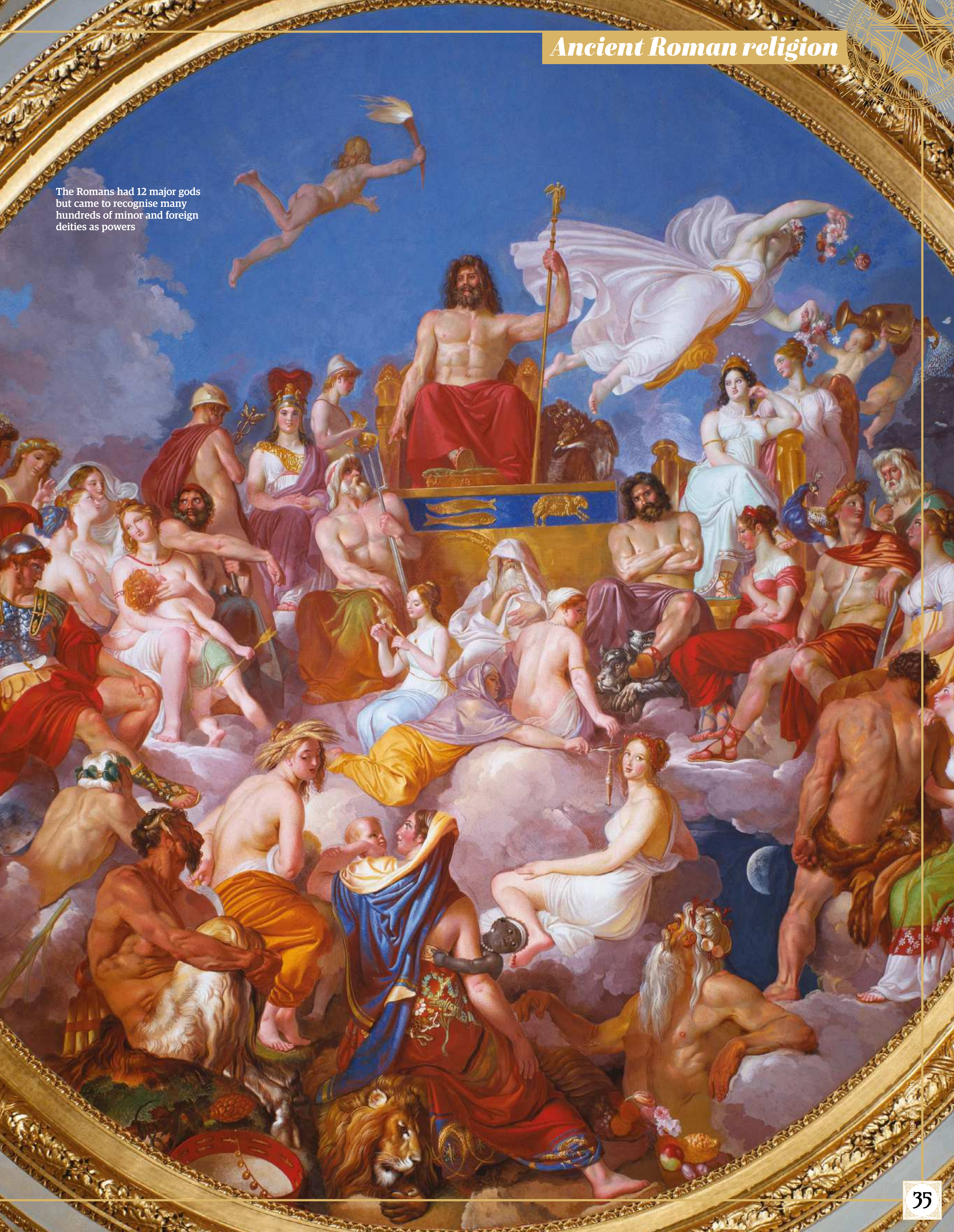
The Roman mind was an odd one; hard-nosed pragmatism was meshed with deeply held superstition. While the lock-step legions of the Empire marched across the world people felt that the might of Rome was supported not so much by their fearsome military prowess but by the goodwill of the gods. It is impossible to understand Rome without knowledge of their pre-Christian faith.

The foundational myth of Rome shows the importance they placed on divine signs. When Romulus and Remus both wanted to found a city they marked out the sky and waited for the gods to send them a message. Remus saw six eagles, but Romulus saw a full dozen and that is why we study 'Roman' paganism and not 'Reman'. The ancient gods worshipped by the Romans were all clearly and closely related to the deities of the Greek world. Zeus the Father (Zeus Pater) of the Greeks morphed into Jupiter of the Romans while maintaining his role as the king of heaven. There is some evidence that both Zeus and Jupiter developed from earlier proto-Indo-European gods but other deities were absorbed into the Roman pantheon within historical memory.

Italy was once home to many colonies sent out by Greek city-states. These held on to the gods of the cities that had founded them. As Rome expanded its influence by conquest these cities entered into the Roman world and their gods became the gods of Rome. Diana, Minerva, Venus, and Hercules are all thought to have become Roman gods in this way.

Before these additions had been made, Roman paganism was influenced by that of the Etruscans. The Etruscans pre-dated Rome and controlled a large area of land bordering Rome in the 9-6th centuries BCE. By the time Rome absorbed the final Etruscan cities it had long before taken up many of their religious practices. The Etruscans studied nature for signs of the gods' instructions. Haruspices were priests who used the entrails of sacrificial animals to read the will of heaven. The practically minded Romans would continue to use this method to predict the future for centuries to come.

Roman paganism in its purest form of around 100 BCE was already therefore a religion of borrowings. While there were proud noble families who looked down on 'foreign' faiths even the haughtiest would have had to admit that gods had long been imported to the city. In 217 BCE Italy was being ravaged by Hannibal and his



The Romans had 12 major gods but came to recognise many hundreds of minor and foreign deities as powers

Image source: Getty

army. Against the warnings of priests the Romans met Hannibal in battle at Lake Trasimene and they suffered one of the worst defeats in history. Clearly the gods had not been on the side of Rome. Consulting the sacred *Sibylline Texts* it was decided that Rome would have to bring Venus of Eryx, a city on Sicily, to Rome. The Romans offered this goddess a huge bribe and a temple in the heart of Rome if only she would relocate. The image of the goddess was transferred to Rome and the worship of Venus Erycina inaugurated. Rome went on to defeat Hannibal.

## Mithras the bull slayer

At sites across the Roman empire strange monuments have been found underground. In domed caves statues depict a young man in the act of slaying a bull. Known as the Tauroctony these sculptures are the remains of the cult of a god known as Mithras.

Mithraism was just one of many 'mystery cults' that flourished during the Roman Empire. These cults were often foreign imports that offered followers access to secrets hidden from outsiders. Some promised to reveal the secrets of the afterlife. We know very little of what the followers of Mithras believed but some clues are found in his temples.

Mithras is sometimes shown as being born from a rock, dining with the god Sol, or with a lion-headed figure surrounded by snakes. The central image of the temple is always the bull slaying, but nothing is known of the meaning of the act. We do know that Mithras worshippers called themselves 'syndexioi' – those who shake hands. Perhaps the secret of Mithras was in the bonds formed between followers. The cult was popular among soldiers and persisted until the 4th century CE when it was suppressed as a rival faith to Christianity.

Image source: Scazon

**The tauroctony (bull slaying) was the focus of worship in Mithraism and echoed the tradition of animal sacrifice found in mainstream Roman paganism**

Prayer for a Roman was not a quiet act of contemplation allowing communion between the worshipper and the worshipped. Roman religion was performative. Worship was loud, colourful, and smelly. A Roman temple was the scene of chanting, gaudily painted images of the gods, and the bloody sacrifice of animals. For the gods to be propitiated they had to be seen to be offered something.

There is some evidence that human sacrifice may once have played a role in Roman paganism. In one legend after an earthquake opened a chasm in the forum of Rome it was feared that the gods were displeased. The city was told to offer its most precious item to pit to placate the gods. Marcus Curtius put on his battle armour, mounted his horse, and leapt into the hole, declaring that bravery was the most valuable possession of the Romans. The chasm closed over him and Rome was saved. Some believe that gladiatorial battles were originally funerary rites with the dead fighters as offerings to the deceased.

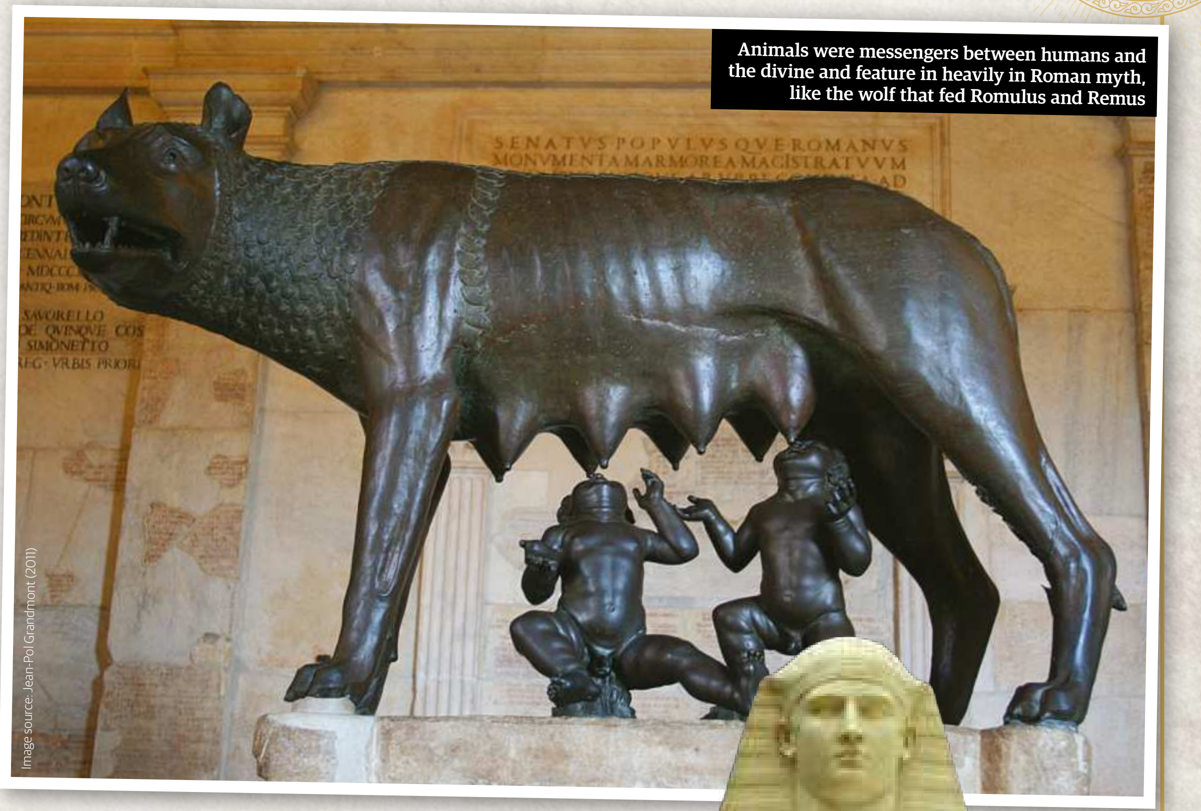
If humans were once offered to the gods, by the time of the Roman Empire it was animals that took up the burden of placating the gods. Sheep, pigs, and cows were often slaughtered. The victim was supposed to be willingly killed so attempts were made to keep it calm before a priest stunned it with a hammer and slit its throat. After the sacrifice feasts were held at which the gods, in the form of their sacred images, would have been present. A portion of the sacrificial beast was burned so that the gods could enjoy their offering through the smoke while their followers feasted.

Sacrifices could be small affairs to bless a family or huge offerings to save the city. In order to survive in the war against Hannibal the city offered Jupiter every single animal born that spring. For those unable to afford a bull it was also appropriate to give the gods a drink of wine, bunch of grapes, or honey cake. Not all the services of the gods were large enough to require a whole ceremony.

In a polytheist pantheon there is always room for another deity. Within a Roman home there would be a small shrine to those gods which were specially honoured within the household. The Lares Familiares and Di Penates were gods with a special role within the household. The Di Penates took care of the family who owned the home.

> "Prayer for a Roman was not a quiet act of contemplation"

Image source: Getty



Animals were messengers between humans and the divine and feature in heavily in Roman myth, like the wolf that fed Romulus and Remus

Image source: Jean-Pol Grandmont (2011)

Every time the family dined a small portion would be offered to a fire to include the Penate in the meal. The Lares Familiares were responsible not only for the family but for everyone, including slaves, who lived within the house.

Some found the profusion of deities bemusing. St Augustine, a hostile witness on Roman paganism, mocked the littleness of some Roman gods. He records how Cardea watched hinges, Forculus guarded doors, and Limentinus was responsible for thresholds. Augustine wondered how it could be that one human guard was enough to watch a doorway when three gods were required. In more vital areas like the harvesting of corn he lists ten gods who have a role in the various stages of the crop's development.

Paganism's ability to add new gods offered Roman emperors a unique political opportunity. Romans were used to worshipping figures that had once been mortal. Romulus himself is said to have mysteriously disappeared into heaven. It was even accepted that some people had divine ancestry. Aeneas, founder of Rome, was the son of Venus and through him Julius Caesar was able to claim to the descendent of a goddess. Caesar was honoured by some as a living god and a house built for him at the Republic's expense was shaped like a temple. Statues were set up to Caesar as a divinity. Unfortunately Julius' flesh was not as impervious to daggers as his statues.

When Caesar was murdered he was officially declared a god. This allowed his adopted son Augustus to call himself Divi Filius - Son of God. Augustus itself was a name he chose for its religious associations. He allowed citizens outside of Italy to build temples in his honour but, perhaps remembering the fate of his uncle, forbade it at Rome. When sailors from Alexandria offered him divine honours he was pleased. They claimed it was through him that they were able to sail the seas in peace, trade, and had liberty. This is the practical Roman definition of a deity - a being able to render aid to worshippers. Augustus was therefore a god worth worshipping. On his death a senator saw an eagle rise from the funeral pyre and so it was decided Augustus would be honoured in Rome too. Many of his successors as emperor followed him into the sky as they died. The Emperor Vespasian even mocked the Imperial Cult on his deathbed. "Alas," he said, "I fear I am becoming a god."

The fall of paganism in Rome was tied to the Imperial family. Constantine was the first emperor to make Christianity legal in the empire and over time pagan symbols, including the statue of Victory in the Senate house were removed. The Emperor Julian was the last pagan emperor but his short reign was unable to bring back religious toleration. After his death in battle, supposedly saying "You have won, Galilean," the Roman world became ever more and finally exclusively Christian.

Image source: Enrique Íñiguez Rodríguez

Image source: CaptMondo

# Religion of the Celts

Celtic paganism spanned a thousand years and the entire European continent, yet is little known today. Who were the mysterious worshippers in those dark forests?

Written by Ben Gazur

The forests, hills, and plains of Europe were terrifying for the ancient Greeks and Romans. The primordial gloom of woods where no civilised person set foot was the location of human sacrifice and dark rites. The north, east, and west of the continent was the home of barbarians, and these people they called the Celts.

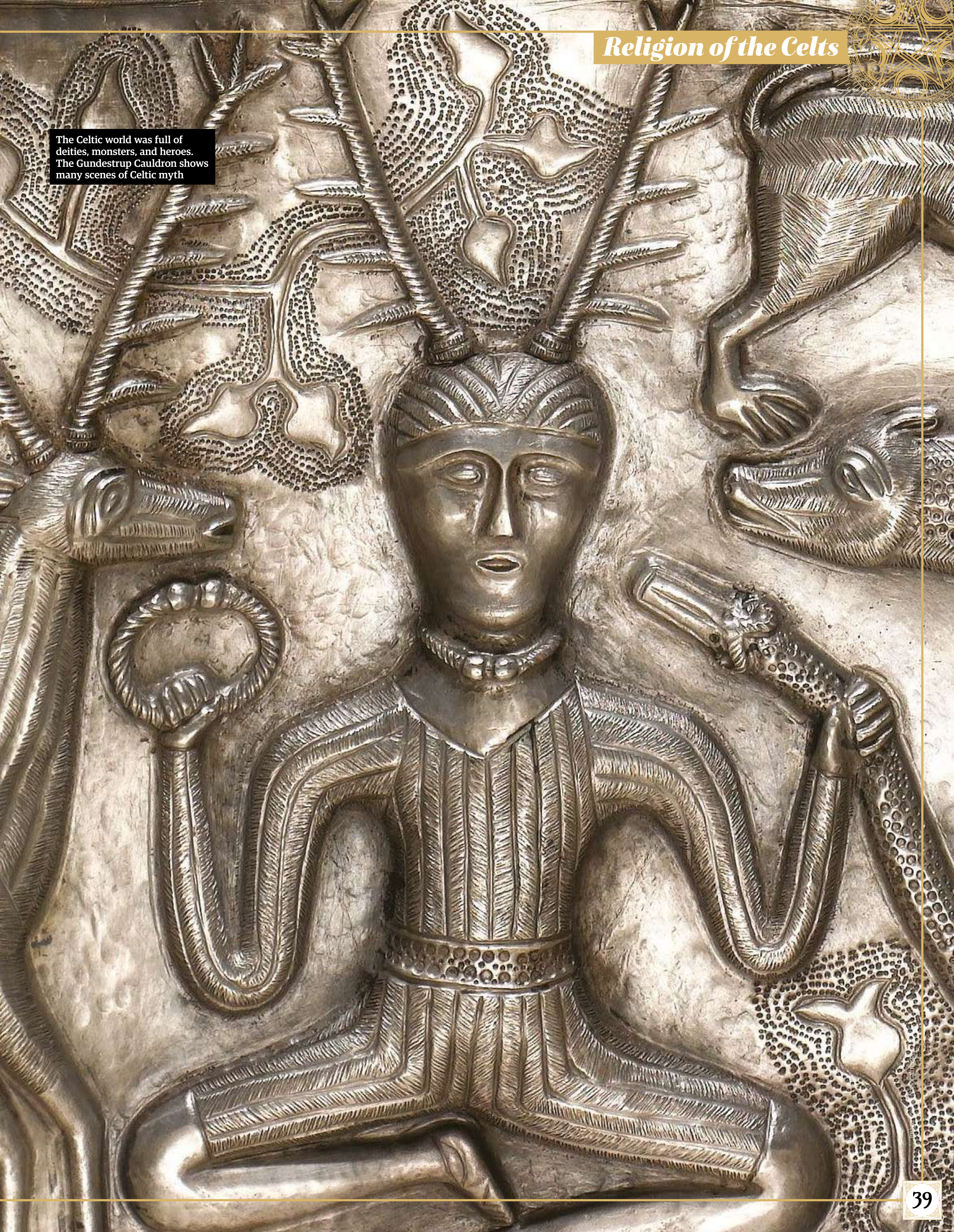
While the classical world tended to think of them as a single society, the reality was a patchwork of tribes and peoples. The Celts may have shared much linguistically and culturally but they were never one nation. From Spain to Bulgaria, the wilds of Scotland to the Mediterranean, and over a thousand years many local differences in their religion evolved. Celtic paganism is a difficult faith to firmly grasp.

Relying on hostile sources such as Caesar obviously requires care. In his work Caesar did not give the gods of the Gauls their native names but referred to them by their Roman counterparts, claiming the main deity of the Gauls was Mercury. The Gaulish Celts apparently had many images of their gods, but the archaeological evidence for this is scant. It may be that the Celts of Gaul used wooden statues of their gods and that these have not survived. Some scholars dispute this and believe that the Celtic tribes mostly worshipped in nature and their gods were not personified in human form.

In the evidence we have of Celts, from Britain all the way to modern Turkey, we find mention of hundreds of deities by name, many mentioned only once. It may be that these gods were very local and specific to a tribe. The goddess Sequana had power over the river Seine, and Celts hundreds of miles away would have no need of her aid. It may also be that many names may refer to one god known by different epithets in different places. It is also true that many gods were worshipped across wide areas.

Many place-names throughout Europe make reference to a god known as Lugus. Lyon in France, Lothian in Scotland, and Legnica in Poland are all named in his honour. The god Lugh of the Irish Celts, again related to Lugus, displayed many of the attributes Caesar described the Celtic 'Mercury' having. He was a god of skills, arts, and good kingship. Votive inscriptions and descriptions in Irish and Welsh poetry paint Lugus as a brave and ideal sovereign.

Other gods from across the Celtic tribes may lack the same name but can be placed into categories that clearly crossed tribal boundaries. Mother-goddesses, called Matres, have been found throughout north-western Europe. Mostly shown on altars and statues as a group of three



The Celtic world was full of deities, monsters, and heroes. The Gundestrup Cauldron shows many scenes of Celtic myth

Image source: Nationalmuseet

> "The number of deities with power and lethal prowess in battle is extensive"

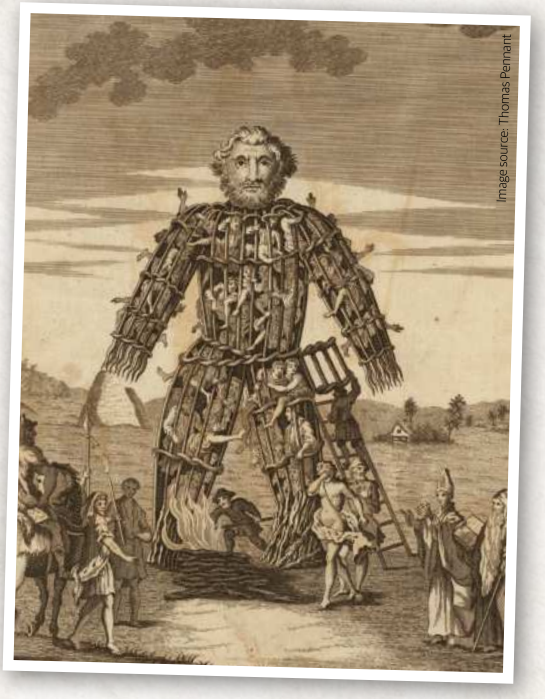


Image source: Thomas Pennant

these goddesses were popular Celtic deities that were associated with sacrifice but also with bounty. One of the goddesses is always depicted with an overflowing basket of fruit and vegetables.

War must have been a major aspect of life in the Celtic tribes. The number of deities with power and lethal prowess in battle is extensive. For the Celts it seems that war itself was embodied by a goddess. In southern Gaul a warrior might invoke Andarta but when Boudicca rode down the Romans in Britain she called out for aid from Andraste. In Ireland the Morrigan was a triple goddess who personified the havoc of battle, the skill of arms, and the playing out of fate in warfare. It is impossible though to know if Celts from different areas would have accepted these variously named deities as the same goddess.

> In Ireland, Celtic paganism had a profound effect on Christianity, with pagan deities reinterpreted as Christian saints

Perhaps the most striking Celtic deity was the Horned God. Images and statues from across Europe have been found of a man crowned by a pair of antlers. His widespread depiction suggests he developed early in the Celtic period and was important in the pagan pantheon. Often called Cernunnos, the god is sometimes surrounded by animals, especially deer. His partially animal form may suggest a strong link with nature. From what we know of Celtic pagan practices, nature was of paramount importance.

Much of what we know about the ancient Celts comes from outside sources. In particular the Celts themselves never wrote down their religious beliefs. Caesar in his *Conquest of Gaul* mentions that this was to stop the spread of the doctrines outside their priestly class, the druids, and to preserve the skills of those who memorised the lore of the Celts. People who write things down, it was thought, tend to forget those things. Unfortunately what those things they wanted remembered were have been forgotten.

Druidic training in the Celtic religion could last for 20 years and they were leaders in society as well as in religion. Druids acted a repositories of history, lore, medicine, and law. Called on to advise kings they could also pass legal sentences. Yet their most important role was in acting as intermediaries between the Celts of Gaul, Britain, and Ireland, and the gods. One druid, named Diviciacus, impressed the Roman statesman Cicero with his ability to predict the future through augury.

Druids have left no material presence in the archaeological record. It seems that they performed their rituals in groves in forests. Pliny the Elder describes white robed druids climbing oak trees to harvest mistletoe with a golden sickle. The mistletoe was used to cure all manner of ailments as long as it did not touch the ground. The knowledge of botany and medicine was inseparable from druidic religion.

Though individual Druids may have pleased the Romans and impressed the Greeks with their knowledge of natural philosophy, as a class they were seen as a threat. The druids taught the theory of transmigration of souls, a form of reincarnation, and this was thought to make Celts fight more fearlessly, as they were not afraid of dying in battle.

The idea of human sacrifice may also have unnerved the Romans. Many sources mention druids offering up human victims, including Caesar's description of burning them in wicker cages, and there is some evidence to support these

## Influence on Christianity

Celtic paganism was absorbed into Roman religion in many areas, but in the relatively un-Romanised Ireland it was Christianity that submerged it. Medieval Irish texts that preserved Celtic tales were sometimes glossed by the scribes who copied them to suggest that paganism prefigured the coming of Christianity. The replacement of Celtic polytheism was not total though and some aspects ended up within Irish Christianity. The horned god Cernunnos appears to have influenced the image of St Ciaran who is said to have lived in the forest and whose first followers were animals. This syncretism may have smoothed the adoption of Christianity for the Irish Celts.

St Brigid is one of the most important saints of Ireland, yet there are some scholars who doubt her historical existence because St Brigid shares her name with a Celtic goddess. It seems that this goddess was simply adopted into Christianity as a saint. The goddess was a nurturing one, and similar imagery and miracles are given to both. Both are associated with holy wells in Kildare and sacred flames guarded by attendants were used in the worship of both.

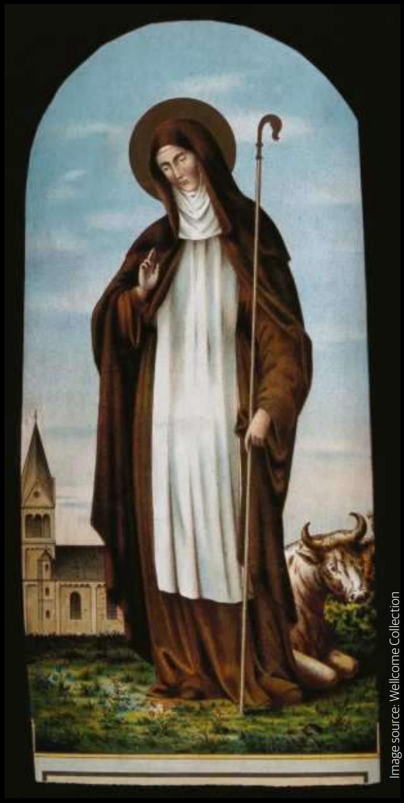


Image source: Wellcome Collection

**Despite the obvious Christian imagery surrounding depictions of St Brigid many think she was once a pagan deity**

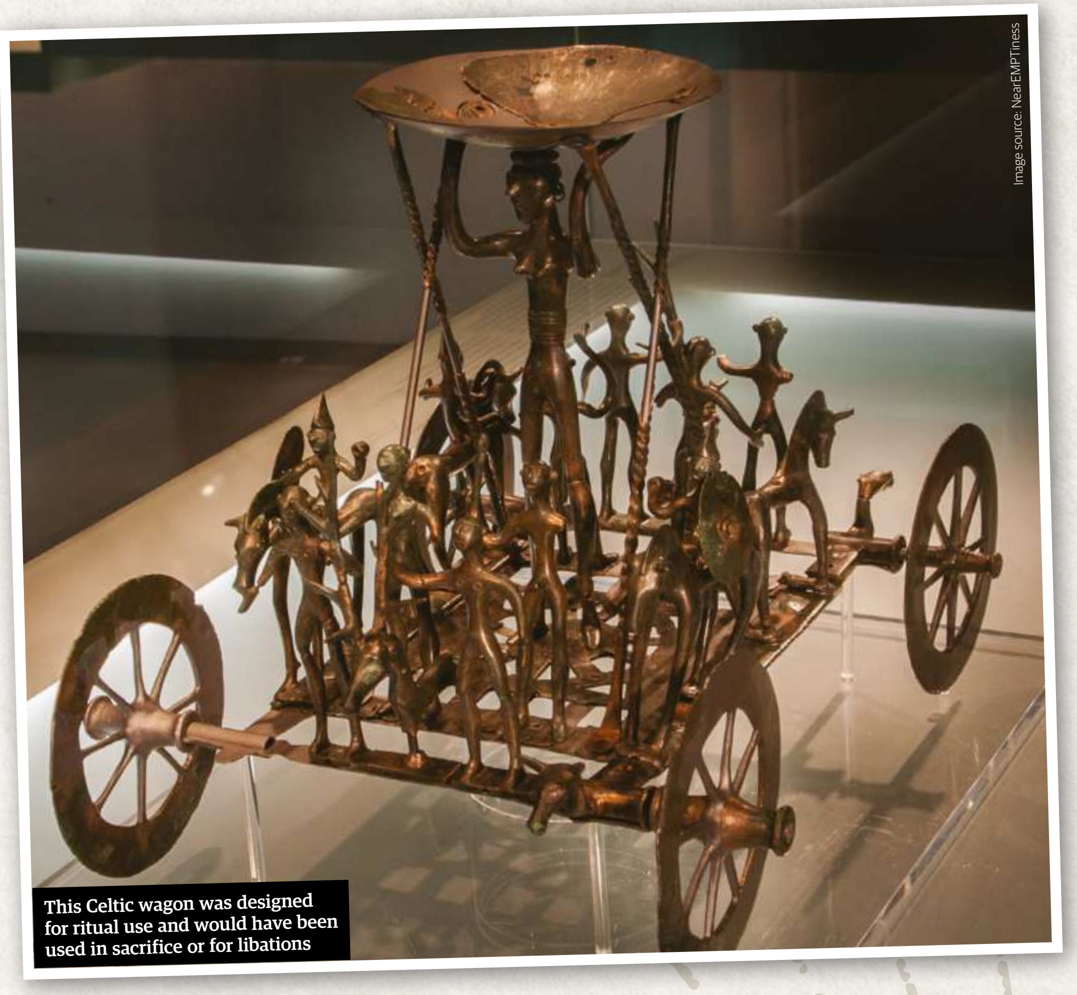


Image source: NearEMPTiness

This Celtic wagon was designed for ritual use and would have been used in sacrifice or for libations

claims. Bog bodies, corpses superbly preserved in bogs across Europe, are often found to have been ritually strangled, and must have played some part in Celtic religion.

Once Gaul and Britain were conquered in the 1st century CE the Romans set about civilising their new subjects - and that required suppression of the druids. Tacitus records how almost the entire Roman army in Britain was used to drive out the druids, finally pushing them to the Welsh island of Anglesey, on the north-western coast:

"On the shore stood the opposing army with its dense array of armed warriors, while between the ranks dashed women, in black attire like the Furies, with hair dishevelled, waving brands. All around, the Druids, lifting up their hands to heaven, and pouring forth dreadful imprecations, scared our soldiers by the unfamiliar sight, so that, as if their limbs were paralysed, they stood motionless, and exposed to wounds."

The druids used all their power of language and religious authority but it was no match for legionary forces. The druidic tradition in Britain withered thereafter, though it may have survived in Ireland for several more centuries.

Yet the death of the druids was not the collapse of Celtic religion. There were still those Celts who lived outside the Roman Empire in the east. Even within the borders of the Empire people still continued to worship the old gods. The Romans did not insist on religious purity. As long as the gods of Rome were respected, and sacrifices made in the Emperor's name, then people were free to worship any other gods they wanted.

Where the Romans found Celtic sites of worship they erected temples and shrines. Springs and rivers were places where Celts offered valuable gifts to the gods. By building Roman-style temples they regularised worship there and brought the Celts into the Roman world. Romans also associated native gods with ones within their own pantheon. The Celtic Sulis worshipped at Bath became Sulis Minerva under Roman rule. Yet the influence was not all in one direction.

Epona is the Celtic goddess of the horse. For the ancient tribes horses were vital in warfare, travel, and agriculture. Though her name is Gaulish, depictions of a maiden on a horse have been found throughout Europe. In her early role she may have played a role in fertility as well. The martial Romans adopted Epona into their religion as a protector of cavalry. Apuleius describes a shrine in a stable being decorated with roses and inscriptions invoking Epona have even been found in Rome itself. Conquerers are often conquered by those they subjugate.

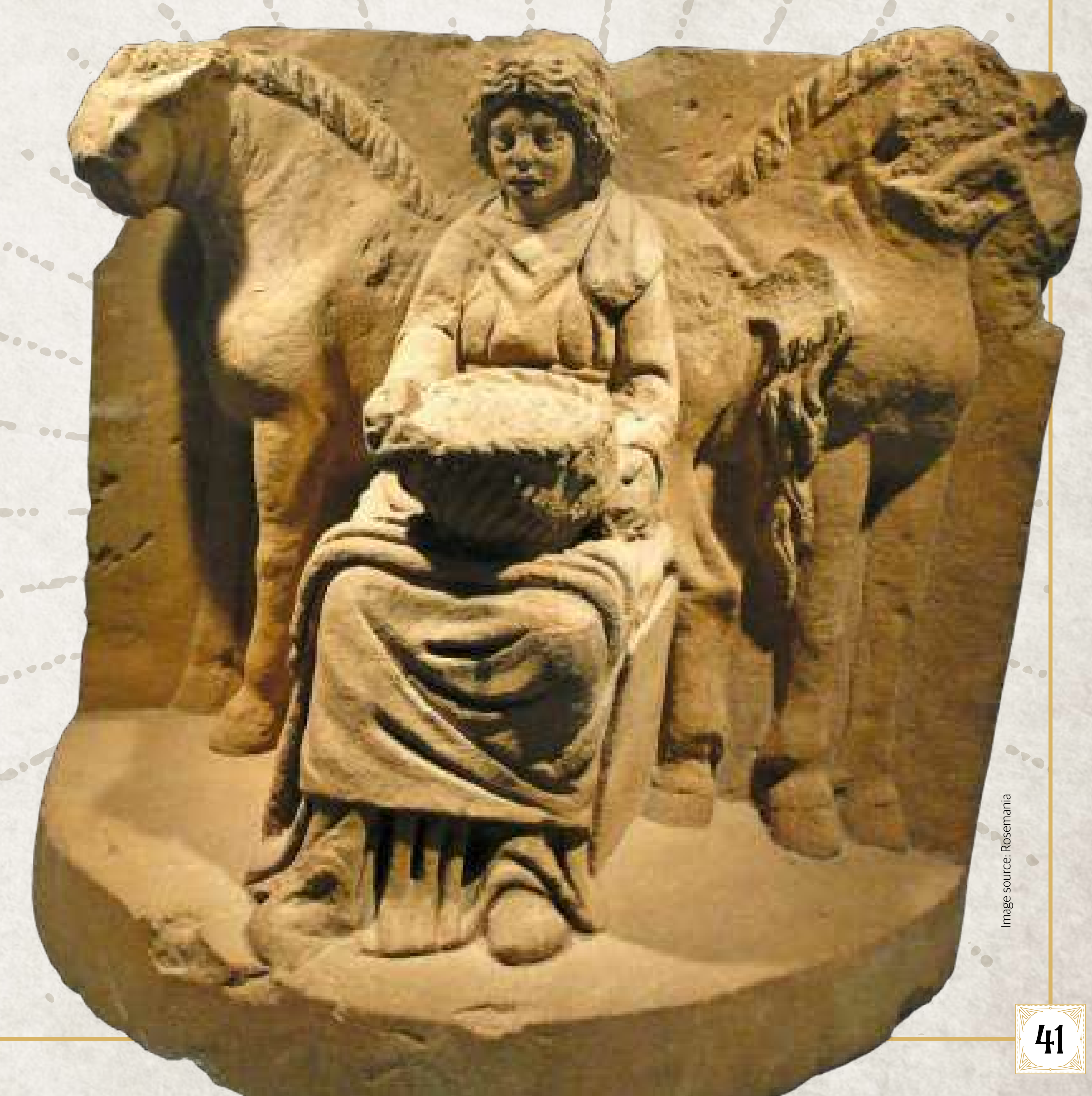


Image source: Rosemania

# Viking myths

## Before they became Christian, the Vikings had a rich polytheistic folk faith that featured a collection of gods

Written by April Madden

Most myths and religious stories tell their peoples' tale of the world's creation, but unusually, the early Viking myths also tell of its destruction. Before Christianity swept through the Scandinavian lands – a process that started in the 8th century – Norway, Sweden and Iceland had their own homegrown pantheon of gods, some of whom we still know from comics, films and TV. In fact, you may be familiar with the central idea of Norse cosmology – the 'world-tree', Yggdrasil – thanks to a diagram drawn by the titular hero of Marvel's *Thor*.

Yggdrasil, a mighty ash tree gnawed by the wyrm Níðhöggr at its roots and crowned by an unnamed eagle, plays host to four deer (Dáinn, Dvalinn, Duneyrr and Duraþrór) that feast on its boughs, and a squirrel named Ratatoskr, who travels up and down, sowing discord between the eagle above and the serpent beneath. The 'Nine Realms' of Norse cosmology are connected by the roots and branches of the tree, and although they are not all specifically or consistently named in the ancient sources, today's consensus tends to agree that they are comprised of Midgard (Earth, home of humans), Álfheimr (home of the elves), Niðavellir or Svartálfaheimr (home of the dwarves or alternatively the 'dark Elves'), Jötunheimr (home of the jötnar, or giants), Vanaheim (home of the Vanir, a type of god), Niflheim (one of the primordial realms, that of ice and mist), Muspelheim (the other of the primordial realms, that of fire), Hel (the realm of the dead, ruled by a queen of the same name), and Asgard, the home of the most powerful gods. The tree is tended by the Norns, three female deities who decide the fate of both humans and gods.

"The Norns are three female deities who decide the fate of both humans and gods"

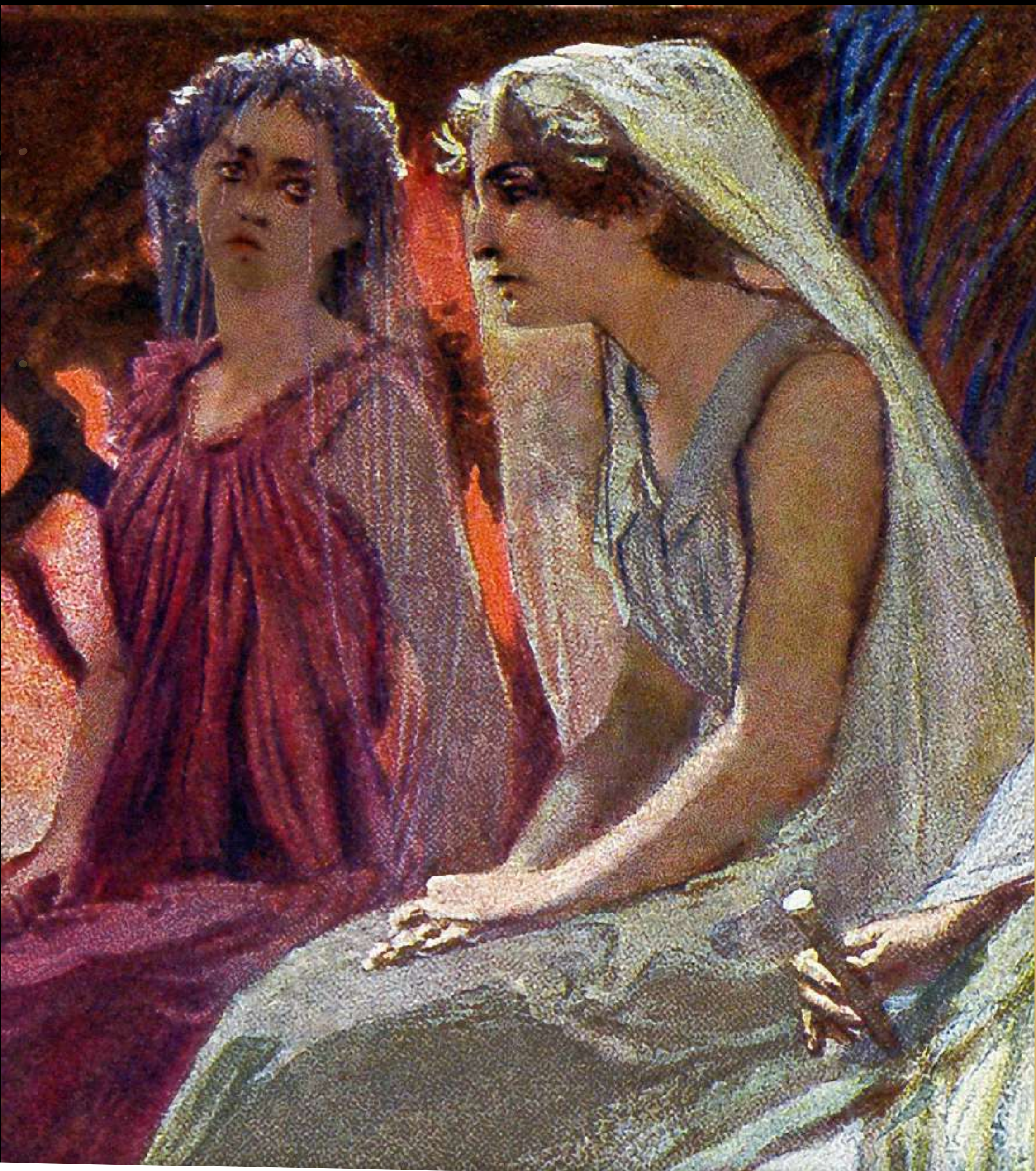
The leader of the gods, the aesir, is Odin, sometimes known as the Allfather. This wise and crafty king could be represented as a hale and hearty warrior in late middle age, ruling over his hall in Asgard, or as a seemingly innocent, seemingly simple beggar with a wide-brimmed hat pulled low over his brow while he wandered through Midgard, presumably to disguise the fact that he had just one eye – having plucked out the other in exchange for wisdom. This was by no means the most dramatic thing Odin had ever done in his endless quest for knowledge – he also hanged himself from Yggdrasil for nine days and nights in order to unlock the secrets of the runes, or writing.

Norse cosmology is one of the few religious frameworks to have a complete Doomsday scenario within its theology

To us, the most famous of Odin's sons is Thor, a protective warrior god associated with oak trees and thunder. Yet while he was (and remains) the most popular god of the Norse pantheon, his half-brother Baldr was revered as 'the best'. Baldr was killed by the trickery of Loki, who is not an áss (a god) at all, but a jötunn, or elemental giant. And he is far from the only member of the pantheon who isn't a member of the aesir race – the goddess Skaði is of jötnar parentage too (as, in fact, is Odin), while Loki's daughter Hel, queen of the underworld, was born to the jötunn Angrboða. The twins Freyr and Freya and their father Njordr are vanir, another race of gods entirely. The Aesir-Vanir War is a myth that tells of the first ever war and its eventual resolution, which sees the two races become allies.

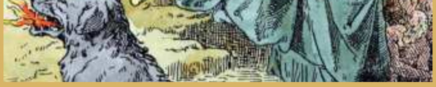
Most of the gods have several partners and children, some aesir, some vanir, some jötnar, with younger generations often displaying a combination of the powers possessed by their parents' races. Other less well-known members of the pantheon include Týr, the one-handed god of war, Iðunn, goddess of youth and her husband Bragi, god of poetry, Loki's horde of children (some monstrous, some not) and Ægir and Rán, the rulers of the sea. Their nine daughters, the waves, are collectively the mothers of Heimdallr, the god who watches for the beginning of Ragnarok.

Ragnarok, or 'the twilight of the gods', is the prophesied end of the world; a great battle in which the denizens of Muspelheim, led by their king Surtr and by Loki, war against the rest of the gods. Few of the major male names in Norse mythology are foretold to survive the conflict – only some of the children of Odin and of Thor, together with most of the goddesses (a notable exception is Sol, the sun goddess, who bears a daughter to follow in her footsteps shortly before her death), are predicted to escape the rains of fire and destruction and bring a new world into being, together with two humans, Líf and Lífþrasir, who will repopulate Midgard. Whether the cycle then begins anew, the stories do not tell us.

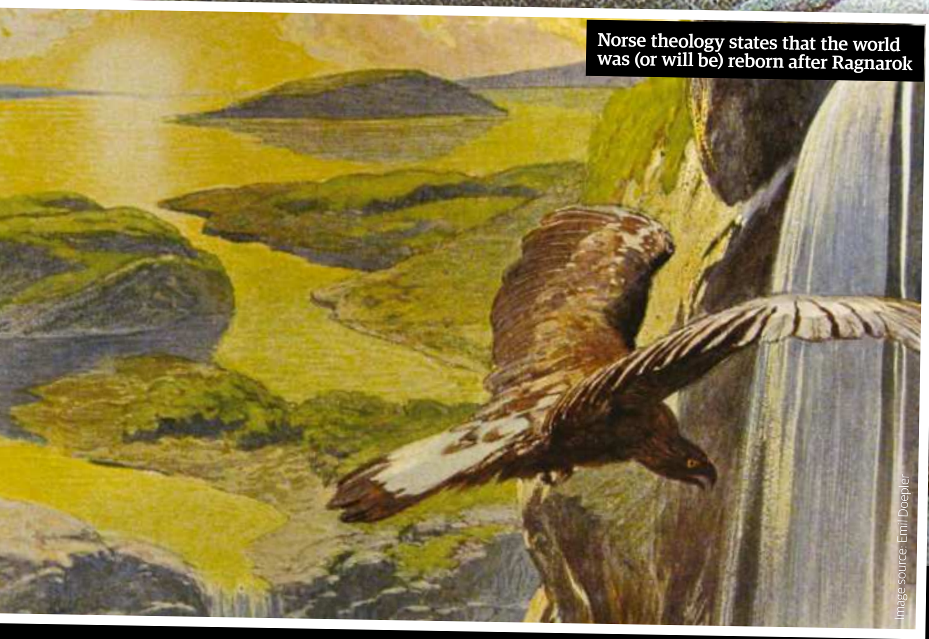


## The afterlife in Norse mythology

During the Christianisation of Scandinavia, the new faith adopted the language of the old, with 'Hell' adapted from the Norse 'Hel'. Christians had previously referred to their theological place of punishment by the name of the Greek god of the Underworld, Hades, or 'Inferno', meaning fire. Yet the Norse Hel wasn't a plain of torment – far from it, according to some sources. Hel, ruled over by the goddess of the same name, was where those who had died of sickness, old age or accident went. It's often described as dreary, but some stories, especially those dealing with the death of Baldr, describe Hel decorating her hall and hosting a feast to welcome the best of Odin's sons. Warriors who died in battle, meanwhile, were shared equally by Odin and Freya; some going to the god's hall Valhalla, others to the goddess' meadow Fólkvangr, where they were feted and fed, and where they could enjoy daily battles followed by banquets for eternity.

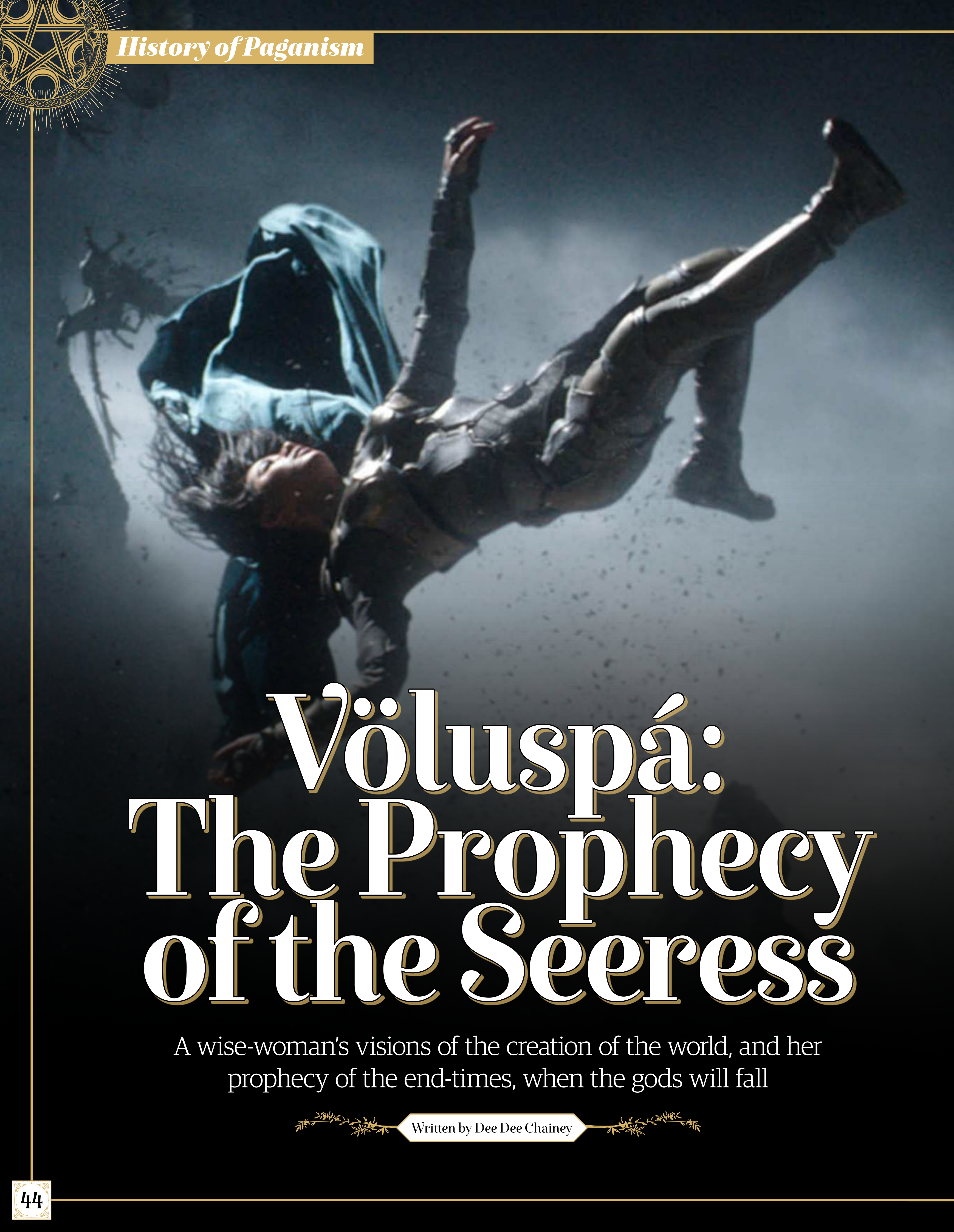


A 19th century illustration of the goddess Hel



Norse theology states that the world was (or will be) reborn after Ragnarok

Image source: Emil Doepler



# Völuspá: The Prophecy of the Seeress

A wise-woman's visions of the creation of the world, and her prophecy of the end-times, when the gods will fall

Written by Dee Dee Chainey

Völuspá, meaning 'prophecy of the wise-woman or seeress', is the first book of the *Poetic Edda*, often seen as the most important. It is preserved in its entirety in the *Codex Regius* (1270 CE), containing stories from oral tradition written on vellum sheets during the 13th and 14th centuries and compiled later, as well as in part in *Hauksbók* (c. 1334). Rather than being the dry, laborious verse that people might first assume, Völuspá is in fact a rip-roaring adventure of raging battles, rife with death, destruction and gut-wrenching anguish. Filled with tales of gods and heroes, the poem tells of a wild wise-woman or witch - known as a völva - regaling Odin with her visions of the beginning of creation, and woeful tales of the end times, known as Ragnarök in Norse myth, when gods would fall, the earth would be wiped clean, and humanity would repopulate the land once more, with only a few of the gods at their side.

Some scholars suggest that the *Elder Edda* is an invaluable repository of knowledge of Germanic myth; and *Völuspá* is the most complex and detailed description of both the creation and destruction of the world that has ever existed in this part of the globe. The work of both Icelandic and Norwegian poets is notoriously complex, and often seen as impenetrable to those uninitiated into the form and style of such verse. This form is composed of around 60 fornyrðislag ('old verse') stanzas - meaning 'the way of ancient words' - with each usually between two and eight lines long, but most often four lines. The stories contained in *Völuspá* are also preserved by Snorri Sturluson, in his *Prose Edda*, yet the *Poetic Edda* version is much more lively, with an amazing level of detail and layer upon layer of mythic symbolism just waiting to be unearthed; if we dig just a little below the surface, we find an intricately woven tapestry of stories that we can trace like the boughs of Yggdrasil itself, as each tales branches out to further stories of the gods brought to life within the pages. The order of the verses changes in the different sources, and modern translators have often continued this trend, switching them around to suit their own reading of the poem, yet most scholars view the order used in the *Codex Regius* as the most useful for understanding the tale in its entirety.

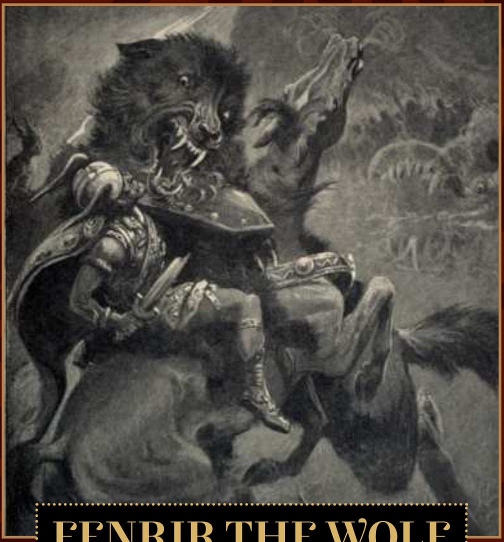
To understand the Eddic poems, we must first understand the mythical world in which the stories took place, and *Völuspá* sets the scene for this perfectly. The poem opens with a völva calling for all mankind to listen to her words. Here they are called 'the sons of Heimdall', which refers to the tale about when the watchman of the gods took on the form of a wanderer named Ríg, travelling from house to house, and fathered the progenitors of each of the three classes of humans - the thralls, freemen and nobles - in a similar vein to the caste system, making Heimdall the father of all mankind. The witch builds the scene well, telling the listeners that she was raised long ago by the ancient jötnar, or giants, and begins to describe what the universe was like at the beginning of creation. She tells of the nine worlds of Norse cosmology, and that the land of men is but one of these. First is the creation of the worlds from a formless void, which some have since called Ginnungagap. In the beginning there was no land nor sea. There was no heaven, and no earth, so certainly no grass upon it; and all that existed was chaos. In this chaos lived the ancient being Ymir, who some say was a giant. In this void, the sons of Bur - named Odin, Vili and Vé, the first of the Æsir gods - raised up the skies, created the earth and rocks, and when this was done the sun shone down and made the land green with grass and vegetation for the first time.

At this time, the skies and astral bodies too had to be organised. The Æsir held a holy council, and decided a place to put the Sun, the Moon and the stars. This is how they created the morning, midday, afternoon and night. From the waxing and waning of the Moon, and the rising and setting of the Sun, time itself gained meaning, and the years began to pass.

A time of plenty ensued, and the Æsir built up great temples and altars across the plane of Ithavoll, the meeting place of the gods. Here too they set up forges smithing ore, hammering out tongs and tools alike. Times were joyful: they spent their hours playing games at tables, gold was abundant, and they wanted for nothing. Yet this gaiety was not to last. Soon three giantesses came from Jötunheimr, the land of the giants. Once more, the gods called an assembly meeting to decide what must be done. It was

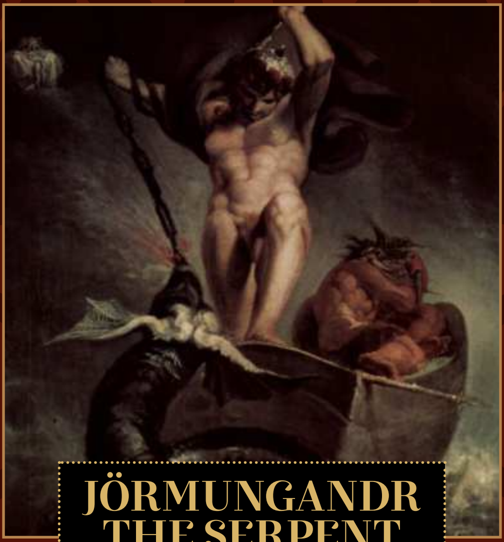
A great deal of pre-Christian Norse theology was preserved in oral traditions before being collected and written down in books of poetry

# The children of Loki and the giantess Angrboða



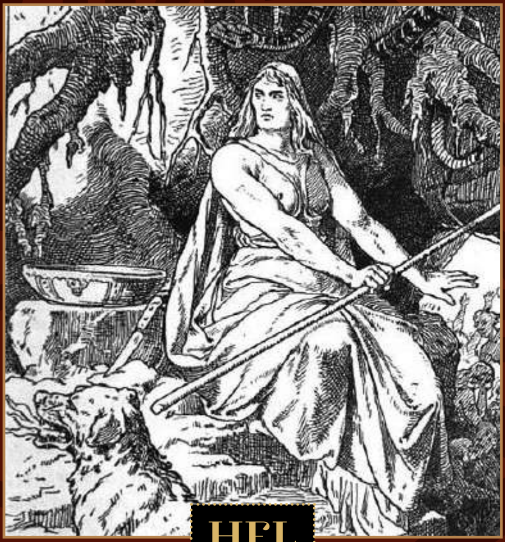
### FENRIR THE WOLF

Fenrir is a monstrous wolf, a son of Loki raised by the gods who hoped to tame him, and minimise the chaos he might wreak in the world. He, along with his siblings, is later summoned by Odin, as it's foretold that they will cause disaster for the gods. Fenrir is fated to devour Odin at Ragnarök, and because of this prophecy he is bound with the chain Gleipnir, forged by the dwarfs from six things that don't exist: the sound of a cat's footfall, the beard of a woman, the roots of a mountain, the sinews of a bear, the breath of a fish, and the spittle of a bird. During the binding, Fenrir bites off the hand of the god Tyr in revenge. The chain will hold him until the end of the world, when he will finally break free to fulfil his destiny and slay Odin. Fenrir is father of the wolf-children Skoll and Hati who steal the Sun and Moon at Ragnarök.



### JÖRMUNGANDR THE SERPENT

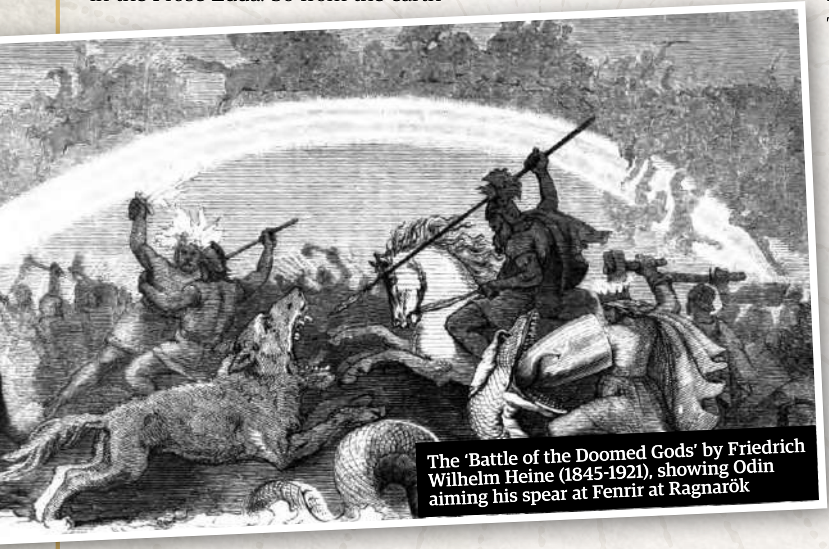
Also known as both the World Serpent and Midgard Serpent, Jörmungandr is the gigantic serpent fated to kill his nemesis Thor at Ragnarök. Jörmungandr was thrown into the ocean that circles Midgard by Odin, and grew large enough to encircle the whole world and even grab his own tail in his maw. One myth tells how Thor pulled Jörmungandr out of the ocean, after baiting his line with a huge ox head on a fishing trip with Hymir, who cuts the line as Thor is reaching for his legendary hammer in order to kill the sea serpent. In another meeting, the giant Útgarða-Loki disguises Jörmungandr as a cat, and charges Thor with lifting it with his great strength. Thor manages to raise just one of the cat's paws from the ground – still, it was a great feat, considering he managed to lift the gigantic World Serpent at all.



### HEL

Often seen as the goddess of the underworld, here in *Völuspá* Loki's daughter is said to rule over the place of the same name. Hel is an underworld realm of the dead, where the wicked undergo torture, seen as a great mansion with many halls. In general, Hel is thought to have been appointed as ruler of the realm, and given control over the nine worlds, after being cast down to Niflheim by Odin. It is here that she receives a portion of the dead – those who die peacefully, of sickness or old-age – with heroes and those who die in battle instead going to Valhalla, the resplendent hall of Odin, while Freyja welcomes others to Fólkvangr, 'the Field of the Warriors'. Often described as half-black or blue and half-flesh-coloured with a grim demeanour, Hel is called a 'troll-woman' or ogre, and is extremely fierce.

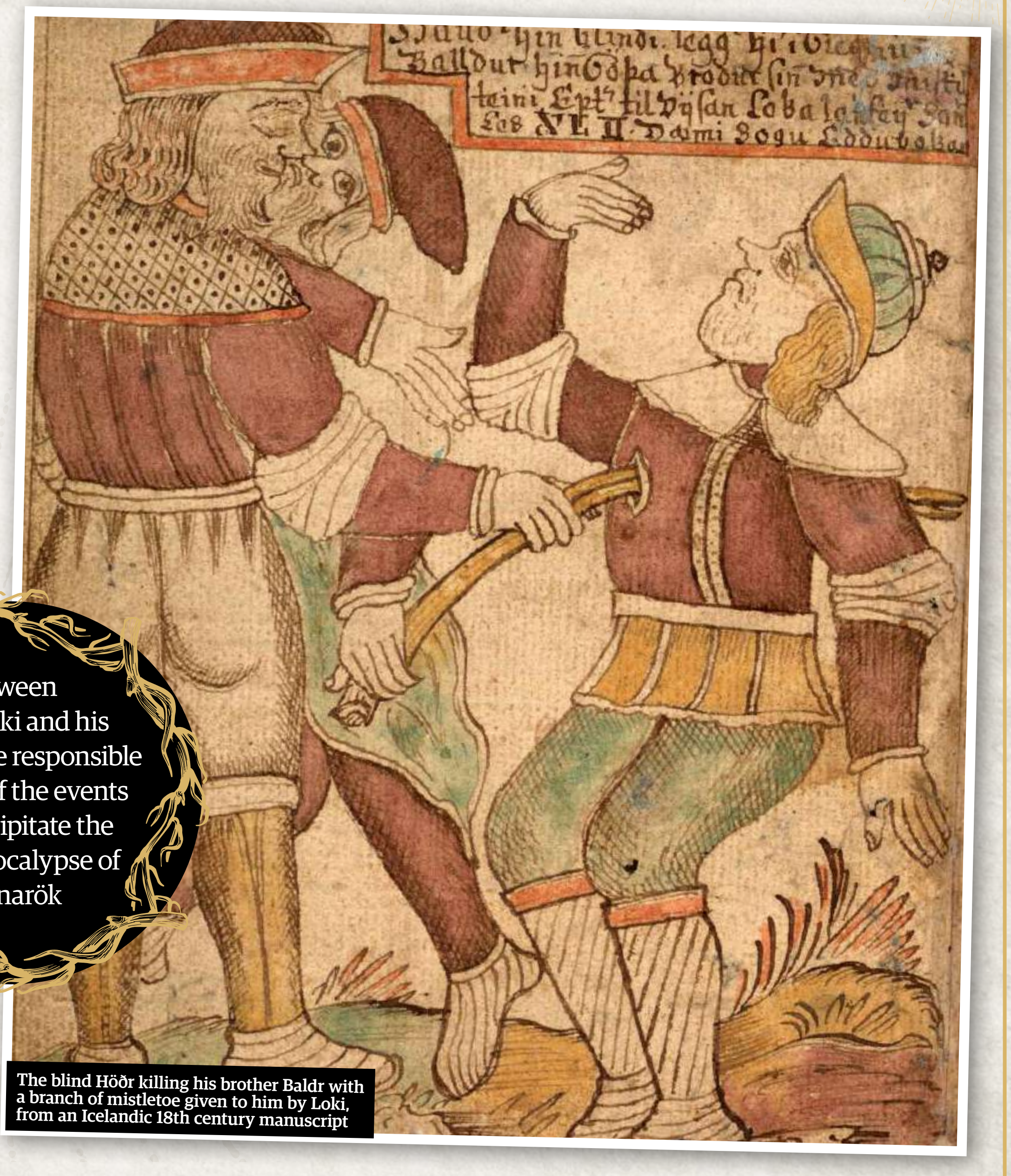
proclaimed that the race of dwarfs must be raised, from the blood and bones of the sea giant, Brimir – who some say is the very same Ymir, whose body was used by Odin, Vili and Vé to fashion the earth in the *Prose Edda*. So from the earth dwarfs were created in man's likeness, the first and greatest of these being Môtsognir, with a list of many more following him in what is known as the 'Catalogue of Dwarfs'. Many of the dwarf-names found here were used by JRR Tolkein in his books about the plight of the hobbits, and other creatures of Middle Earth, with the name 'Gandalf' being the most well-known of these, said to mean 'magic elf'. Other name meanings include 'mighty thief', 'wind elf' and 'oak shield'. The witch tells that the dwarfs came from the rocks and mountains, through the wetlands, up to the plains where they made their home in the sands.



The 'Battle of the Doomed Gods' by Friedrich Wilhelm Heine (1845-1921), showing Odin aiming his spear at Fenrir at Ragnarök

The poem seems to shift here, when three of the Æsir come to the world from their assembly, and we are told of the creation of the first man and woman: Ask and Embla, meaning 'ash' and 'elm', who are without a destiny, and without all sense and spirit. (Strangely, while Snorri doesn't give us the names of the first humans in the *Prose Edda*, he does say that they are made out of trees, confirming the connection here in Völuspá.) We are also told that they do not yet have blood, cannot move, and are without colour. The two are devoid of life until the three gods come to them, and bestow gifts upon them: spirit from Odin, sense from Hoenir, and heat and goodly colour from Lothur, which some believe is an older name for Loki, the trickster figure of Norse myth who is often associated with fire and flame.

Here, the völva describes the mythical Yggdrasil, a gigantic evergreen ash tree that stands at the centre of the nine worlds. It is covered in shining



The blind Höðr killing his brother Baldr with a branch of mistletoe given to him by Loki, from an Icelandic 18th century manuscript

white loam, and all the rains and dew that cover the valleys of earth flow from it, as it stands above the Well of Fate, Urðarbrunnr. This well is guarded by the three Norns themselves - Urðr, Verðandi, and Skuld - the rulers of destiny who set down the laws of men, choose their lives, and dictate their fate, similar to the three Fates in other mythologies.

Next, the witch speaks directly to the god Odin, telling him that she knows all, including the lengths he is willing to go to in order to learn of his own destiny - indeed even the location of his eye. This reference conjures the tale of when he sacrificed his eye in return for a drink from the waters of Mímir's well. While this passage is shrouded in mystery here in *Völuspá*, the *Prose Edda* explains that the well's waters contain both wisdom and intelligence, and Mímir himself drinks from them each morning, the source of his own knowledge and wisdom. Because she too knows all, she remembers the first war in all the worlds, when the being Gullveig was speared by the gods, and then burned three times in the hall of Hárr - or Odin - only to be reborn three times also. After this burning she was named Heiðr - or Heidi - and was a great witch, all seeing and wise in the ways of magic, bewitching the minds of all who saw her magical feats, and able to tame even wolves; yet, it is added that she was a joy to all evil people who beheld her. The witch was said to have performed seiðr magic, which archaeologists believe to be of a shamanic nature, using trances and other sorcery to cast spells. Some have suggested that this witch is in fact the goddess Freyja, who was the first of the Vanir gods to come among the Æsir, and whose mistreatment led to the great Æsir-Vanir war, recounted next in *Völuspá*. Indeed, *Ynglinga saga* says that it was Freyja herself who introduced seiðr magic - a purely Vanir practice - to the Æsir gods.

Between them Loki and his children are responsible for most of the events that precipitate the Norse apocalypse of Ragnarök

“In this chaos lived the ancient being Ymir, who some say was a giant”

The war began when Odin hurled his spear, and the wall that protected the Æsir gods was broken through by the warlike Vanir. Once more, an assembly was held, to decide whether the Æsir gods should pay a fine, or if both pantheons could be worshipped, side by side. The latter was decided upon, and both the Æsir and Vanir were to be worshipped in equal measure. Another story is alluded to here: a giant was tasked with rebuilding the demolished walls of Asgard, the home of the gods, after the Vanir broke them down. In return, he would be given the Sun and Moon, with Freyja as his wife. This promise was broken when the gods charged Loki with delaying the works so that they were not completed in the allotted time bargained, at which the giant threatened the gods. Thor rose up in anger and killed the giant, breaking their oath to him, which led to the two races becoming sworn enemies. Here, the audience would be familiar with the tales, and would think to the final battle, Ragnarök, in which the giants would form a faction of the gods' enemies. The völva underpins this by interjecting with more secret knowledge about the gods: this time that the horn of Heimdall, called Gjallarhorn, is hidden under the world tree. This is the horn that the watchman will use to warn the gods of the oncoming destruction at the end of the world, and call them to battle when the rainbow bridge is breached. In *Grímnismál* this is called Bifröst - it separates Asgard from the realm of men.

This is the point where the völva's words turn to the real reason for Odin's audience: her prophecy for the future, that of the fate of the gods. First she refers to the slaying of Baldr, the son of Odin, and the goddess Frigg, the shining one of the gods. While not recounted in detail here, the tale tells that Frigg, a worried mother, made all things on

Earth swear an oath not to harm her son – all but mistletoe, deemed too weak to hurt him. After this, the gods often took to launching weapons at Baldr in sport. However, she says that in her visions mischievous Loki brought a mistletoe branch to Baldr's brother, Höðr, who happened to be blind. Höðr fatefully threw the branch at Baldr, and killed him. In retribution, Loki was tied to a rock using the entrails of his son, and a venomous serpent set above his head. His wife Sigyn stood faithfully by, catching the drips in a bowl, yet she had to go to empty it whenever it became full, and each time venom landed on Loki the Earth shook with his writhing. That shaking is said to be an explanation for earthquakes.

> Norse mythology was only written down after the Christianisation of Scandinavia, so some stories have a more Biblical slant

Following this, the gods will be overwhelmed by their enemies: the jötnar who reside on the banks of the icy River Slith, the dwarfs of the golden halls of the dark fells, and the dead who reside in the realms of Hel. The völva tells Odin of her vision of a great hall in Hel, the underworld realm of the dead, covered in slithering venomous serpents, or else with walls woven from their spines; in this place the worst of men wade in sluggish rivers, those who have broken oaths, perjurers, murders, and seducers. Here too lurks Níðhöggr, meaning 'malice striker', a serpent-like dragon who gnaws on the roots of the world-tree, and represents all the evil in the world; here he sucks on the blood from the corpses of the dead, while the wolf tears at men.

Now the seeress lists the signs that presage Ragnarök. First, the sun will grow dark. Great storms will sweep across the land, and three roosters will crow to give the signal that the battle is about to commence. Eggthér, the watchman of the giants, sits, cheerfully playing on his harp, when the first, the red cockerel Fjalar ('deceiver') crows from the forests of Jötunheimr to wake the giants for battle. Next to be heard will be the cries of Gullinkambi from Valhalla, the great hall, where the gods will awake to his call. And the third and last call will be from Hel's rust-red rooster, from the depths of the underworld. Next, Garmr, the hell-hound guardian of the gates of the underworld, will howl, break his chains and run amok. Heimdall will blow his Gjallarhorn calling the gods to their last battle, while Odin seeks wisdom from Mímir's severed head. Odin is said to carry this head with him as it gives him counsel, after he embalmed it and magically gave it power to speak. As the world tree bends and groans, the fire jötnar will come forth, and the World Serpent writhes, creating gigantic waves that roll across the seas. Having broken free from its mooring in the tumult, the giant Hrym will set sail from the east in his ship Naglfar – made from the finger and toenails of the dead. Aboard this vessel is the jötnar army, preparing to battle the gods in the final showdown of the world's end. From the north, Loki stands at the helm of a ship carrying the dead of Hel.

> "As the world tree bends and groans, the fire jötnar will come forth"

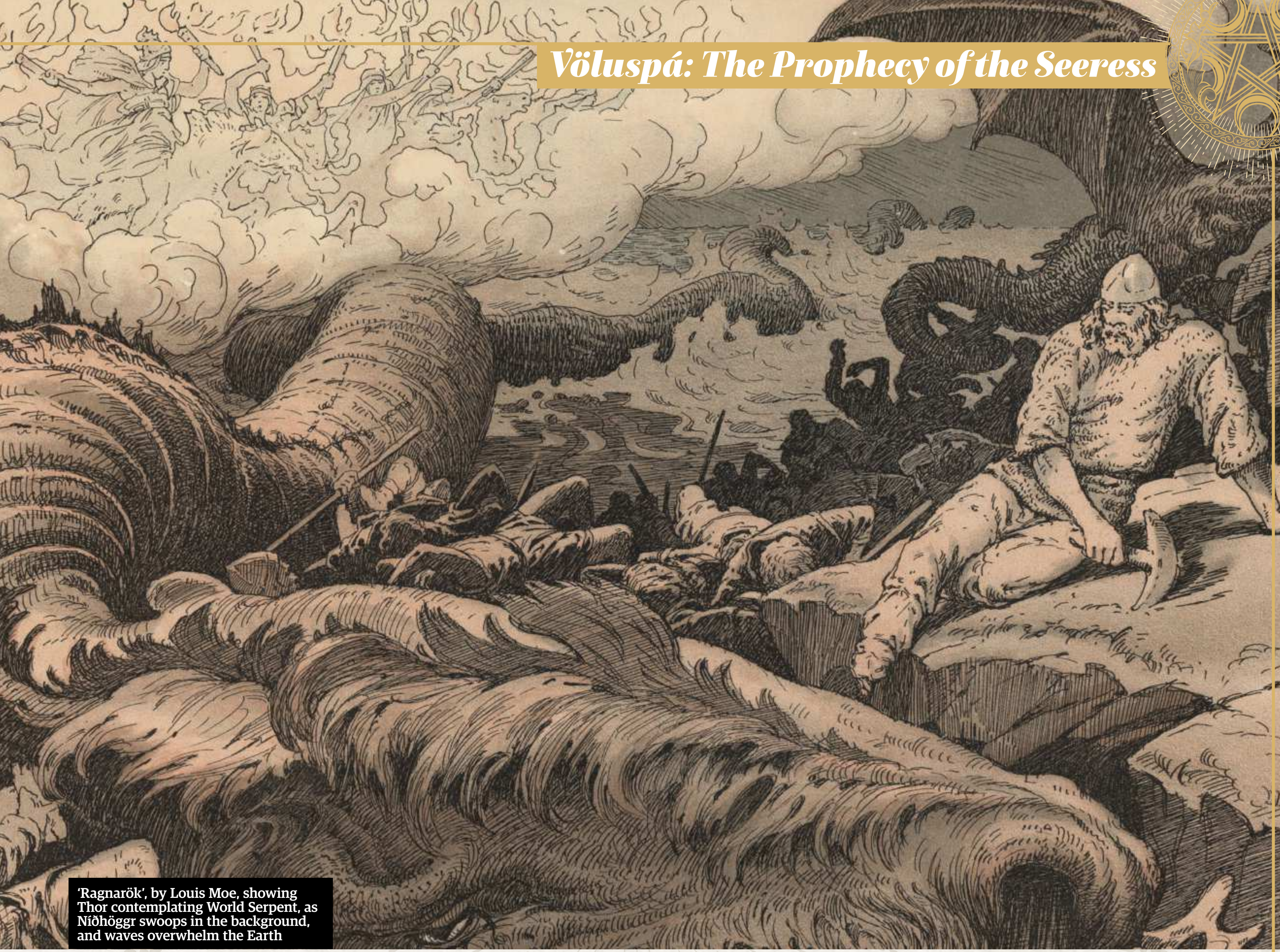
It's said that, during these times, brother will kill brother, and no one will be spared. The Earth will shudder under the weight of the violence of swords and axes, from the debauchery that transgresses even family bonds, and soon the world will sink. After a final council, the gods face their enemies in the bloody battle that is their fated doom. Odin will be eaten alive by Fenrir, Loki's wolf son; Thor defeats his nemesis, the World Serpent, in combat, only to fall to the ground after just nine steps, able to take no more after being subjected to its poisonous breath; Freyr will be killed by the warrior giant who rules the fiery realm of Muspelheim. The sun grows dark, the heavens blacken as the hot stars whirl down to earth, and fires touch the skies as the earth is submersed under the waters. After a time, the seeress sees the Earth re-emerge once more from under the waters, and a lone eagle hovers above a mountain, fishing in a waterfall. The surviving gods gather at their meeting place on the planes. Here, they ponder what has happened, and talk of the great battle, the World Serpent, and the wisdom of the runes. Finally, it's said that the golden games tables will once more stand in the verdant grass, as a symbol of brighter days.

## The Elder Edda

We are still unsure as to who originally created *Völuspá*, where it was written, or who, indeed, compiled the entire *Elder Edda* in which the poem appears, although many have suggested Sæmund the Wise, an earlier scholar who lived from 1056-1133 CE, as the man who compiled the *Poetic Edda*. Many scholars argue that *Völuspá* is too rich in pagan imagery, with an unparalleled force of belief and vividness, for it to have been written by a Christian intent on archaising the tale; most say that it was written – without doubt – by a pagan. However, most also now accept the Christian ideas interwoven through the poem, particularly in the last stanza which mentions 'a mighty lord that rules over all'. Because of this, the poem is thought to date to the years where Scandinavia was transitioning from pagan beliefs to Christianity – at some point around the 10th century – and written by an Icelander with some exposure to Christianity.

A version of *Völuspá* also appears in *Hauksbók* ('book of Haukr'), which is thought to be penned by many people, yet mainly written and compiled by the Icelandic lawspeaker and knight of Norway, Haukr Erlendsson, in the 14th century. Originally one manuscript, it is now in three parts, with many portions being lost. This manuscript, like many others that still survive, is thought to contain fragments from older documents that recounted the myths, but now no longer exist.

While the poems preserve the words of the authors, and their voices speak to us through time, their faces are lost to us forever



'Ragnarök', by Louis Moe, showing Thor contemplating World Serpent, as Níðhöggr swoops in the background, and waves overwhelm the Earth

In the aftermath, Baldr and his blind brother, Höðr, will return from Hel to live once more among the gods, and the fields of the land spring up, fertile and bearing crops without being sown. Two sons will inhabit the world, and the hall of Gimlé – the post-Ragnarök world – will be thatched with gold, as the righteous rulers live happily thereafter. Yet, here, at the end, we see the shadowy dragon Níðhöggr rise once more. Only this time, he carries the corpses of men on the backs of his wings as he flies. Many think that the dragon Níðhöggr is the herald that announces the beginning of Ragnarök – but is he instead a symbol of renewal, as the world is reborn into a new day? At this, the völva, too, sinks; her prophecy is at an end.

While some may say the happenings recounted in *Völuspá* are nothing more than stories crafted by an active imagination, it's thought that the worship of the Vanir originated in the Baltic, and around the North Sea, later spreading northwards to Scandinavia. One might expect conflict when two different belief systems confront each other for the first time, and many scholars believe that this is the explanation for the Æsir-Vanir war of mythology. Only when the belief systems – and pantheons – were conflated, and merged into one mythology did the frictions subside. Indeed, it's said that the war ended only when hostages were finally exchanged. Scholars have argued that this myth runs parallel to the idea of an invasion of Germanic fertility belief systems by a more sanguine religion; for instance the invasion of the Indo-Europeans, which would fit well with the descriptions of how the Vanir pitted themselves against the Æsir gods. The historical accuracy of the events described in *Völuspá* – and indeed the *Edda* as a whole – is still widely debated by scholars, but it's widely believed that the stories preserved in these mythologies may well be fictionalised accounts of real events.

"The earth will shudder under the weight of the violence of swords and axes"

Was there a true history of clashing cultures, of a battle to rival all others, that begun when hostages were taken from one tribe and mistreated by another? We will never know the truth of these events; instead we are left to match these remnants of poems to the fragments left in the archaeological record in our imaginations only. Too little exists to ever be completely sure of their truth. Yet with these vellum leaves, and these dark tales of death and destruction, we can see into the minds of old; a glimpse back in time, into an era when war was commonplace and magic ruled. As the ships that once creaked through primordial waters were carried along by the waves as sea serpents lashed at their creaking planks, these tales are carried down to us so that we too may know their secrets. And on days dark with thunder, when the waves are battering the land as if the World Serpent, has unleashed his mighty tail, we too can listen carefully for the call of three solitary roosters, in case they are followed by the fateful trumpeting of the Gjallarhorn from realms unseen...

# Anglo-Saxon paganism

Paganism in Britain flourished after the withdrawal of Roman forces - the gods that came with Saxon invaders reshaped Britain forever

Written by Ben Gazur

When the Romans withdrew their forces from Britain around 410 CE the people they left behind were left in both a tricky military situation and a confused religious state. The Roman Empire was officially a Christian one, yet outside of cities and the elite many British people clung to their paganism. Even Christians referenced older pagan traditions. A mosaic from Hinton St Mary depicts both Jesus and a range of mythical Greek figures. This mixture of faiths was not to last however - the Anglo-Saxons were coming, and bringing their own religion.

In the power vacuum left by the Romans bands of warriors from Northern Europe came to Britain. The monk Gildas described in his *Ruin of Britain* how the "impious and fierce" Saxons were invited to protect the southern parts of Britain from the wild attacks of northern tribes. He thought this invitation was like welcoming "wolves into the sheep-fold." As a Christian Gildas saw the Saxons not just as a threat to British sovereignty but as enemies of his god. For the next 300 years the dominant religion in Britain was what today we'd call Anglo-Saxon paganism.

No British person at this time would have called themselves 'pagan'. It was a derogatory term applied to them by Christian writers but has been used ever since to describe their religion. Without a central figure of religious authority Anglo-Saxon paganism was more akin to the folk practices of the Celtic paganism from which it evolved, in that many local variants formed across tribal and national boundaries. While the continental invaders brought their own beliefs it seems likely that in Britain their religion merged with the existing paganism of the people to create a novel Anglo-Saxon paganism.

> Traces of Anglo-Saxon religious thought and theology can be found in the English names of the days of the week

Unfortunately the Anglo-Saxons themselves have left us no written account of their religion. All the evidence we have comes from later sources after the arrival of Christian missionaries. Much of the evidence for Anglo-Saxon deities comes from the names they have left embedded in the British landscape. The god Woden still speaks to us from places like Wednesfield and Woodnesborough. Anglo-Saxon paganism must be reconstructed from the fragments scattered across many different texts and locations around England.

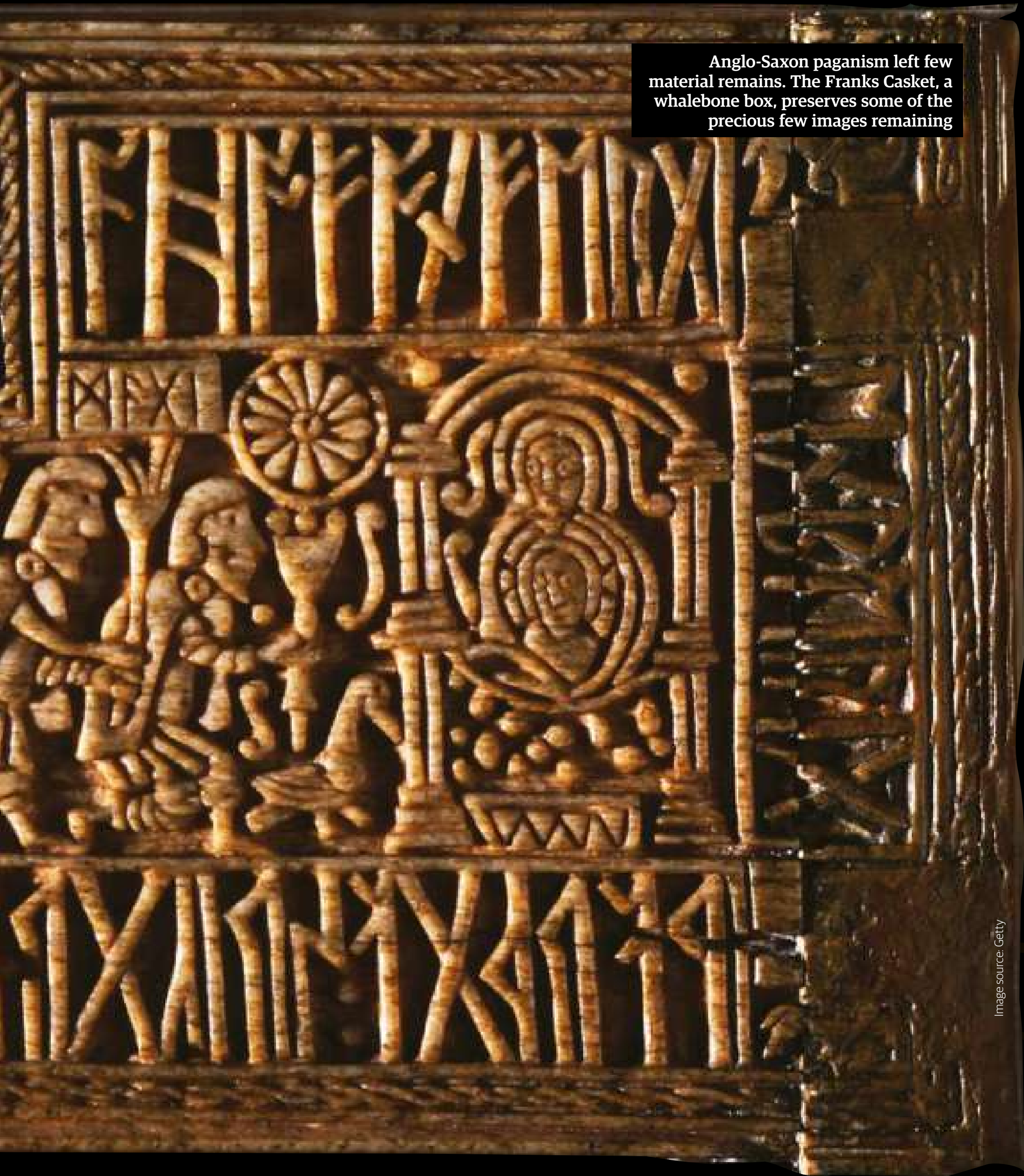
For Anglo-Saxons the world was controlled by fate. Wyrd, as the Anglo-Saxons called it, is the force that moves everything under heaven. As the poem *Beowulf* says "Wyrd [fate] goes ever as it must." There was no use struggling with it and it is impossible to separate wyrd from our lives. Every aspect of our destiny is inherent in everything we do. This fatalist view of existence points to Anglo-Saxon paganism as being a religion of this world. It may do us good to invoke the gods, but only if we were fated to invoke the gods in the first place.

Those gods we might call on were many. Anglo-Saxon paganism was polytheistic and included many deities that seem familiar to those who have studied Norse and Germanic paganism. The chief god of the Anglo-Saxons was Woden, who bears more than a passing resemblance to the Norse Odin. Woden was a god of war but also wisdom. His skill with runes associated Woden with magic.

Runes were not used for writing long prose texts but usually for short inscriptions either in commemoration of someone or in calling for supernatural aid. The monk Bede, a famous historian, mentions how when a man called Imma was captured by enemies he kept escaping. The captors suspected Imma was using 'loosening words', likely runic inscriptions, to slip his shackles. Bede, of course, assures us that it was saying Christian mass that freed his bound hands.

Tiw was the god of war that Anglo-Saxons called on for victory in battle. To the bellicose kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon Britain his skill at arms was a prized one. Thunor was the Anglo-Saxon equivalent of the Norse Thor. Thunor was the protector of the common man and humanity as a whole. With his hammer he kept the giants at bay. His hammer symbol was particularly popular on goods left in burials.

Anglo-Saxon graves are a major source of our knowledge of their beliefs on the afterlife. The body of the dead seems to have been of little importance to survival in the afterlife. While most people were buried there was also a tradition of



Anglo-Saxon paganism left few material remains. The Franks Casket, a whalebone box, preserves some of the precious few images remaining

Image source Getty

cremation. The burned remains would be placed in a pottery urn, sometimes decorated with the swastika of Thunor or the runic symbol of Tiw.

Those bodies buried whole were often accompanied by grave goods, which might have been meant to accompany the deceased into the next life. Men, and even boys, were given weapons while women were interred with household objects and jewellery. We may never know exactly what the actions Anglo-Saxons performed for the dead represented however; some of them do not have obvious meanings. Decapitations were common on the dead and the head might be placed in many positions in relation to the body.

The living Anglo-Saxon worshipped the gods in a variety of locations. Sacred groves perhaps stretching back to the time of the Celts may have been preserved into the Anglo-Saxon period. 'Hearg' in Old English meant a holy grove or shrine. Places with the word 'harrow' in them often derived from such places. Weohs by contrast were smaller shrines found by roadsides. No archaeological evidence for human constructed sites of worship has been found but there are references in later texts to them. In Pope Gregory's letter to Mellitus he says: "The idol temples of that race [the English] should by no means be

"The landscape itself might have been alive in some sense to the people of this period"

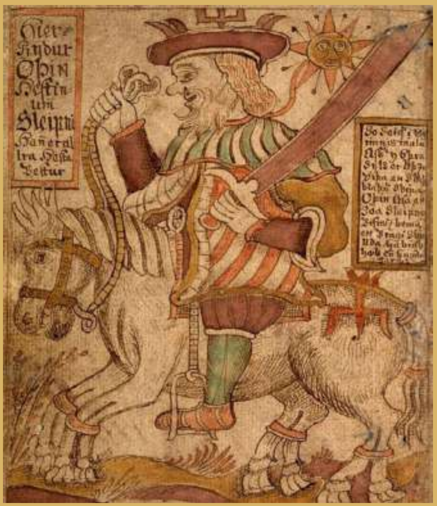
## Lacnunga: Book of Spells

The *Lacnunga* is a collection of Anglo-Saxon medical texts and charms that gives us a glimpse at how the Anglo-Saxons may have used their faith to heal themselves. Many of the cures offered in the *Lacnunga* are simply various mixtures of plant and animal bits that may do some good if nothing better is on offer. Yet several charms call on powers beyond the mere ingredients of the medicine, and one remedy has even been proven to kill the antibiotic-resistant MRSA bacteria.

One gives examples of rituals to be done by mothers in various situations. A mother who cannot nurse her infant must step three times over a dead person's grave. If that does not work she must take a sip of cow's milk and spit it in running water and then take a drink from the stream.

In the 'Nine Herbs Charm,' Woden the god is specifically named. In the poem, nine plants including mugwort, thyme, and fennel are mentioned as being particularly efficacious against wounds becoming infected, and it is Woden who is credited with creating these plants.

*"A snake came crawling, it bit a man*
*Then Woden took nine glory-twigs,*
*Smote the serpent so that it flew into nine parts."*



**The gods could offer more than supernatural support. Odin placed herbs in nature and taught humans how to create medicines**

**Images and descriptions of drinking suggest that such gatherings had ritual meanings and fostered community and bonds of loyalty**

Image source: Berig

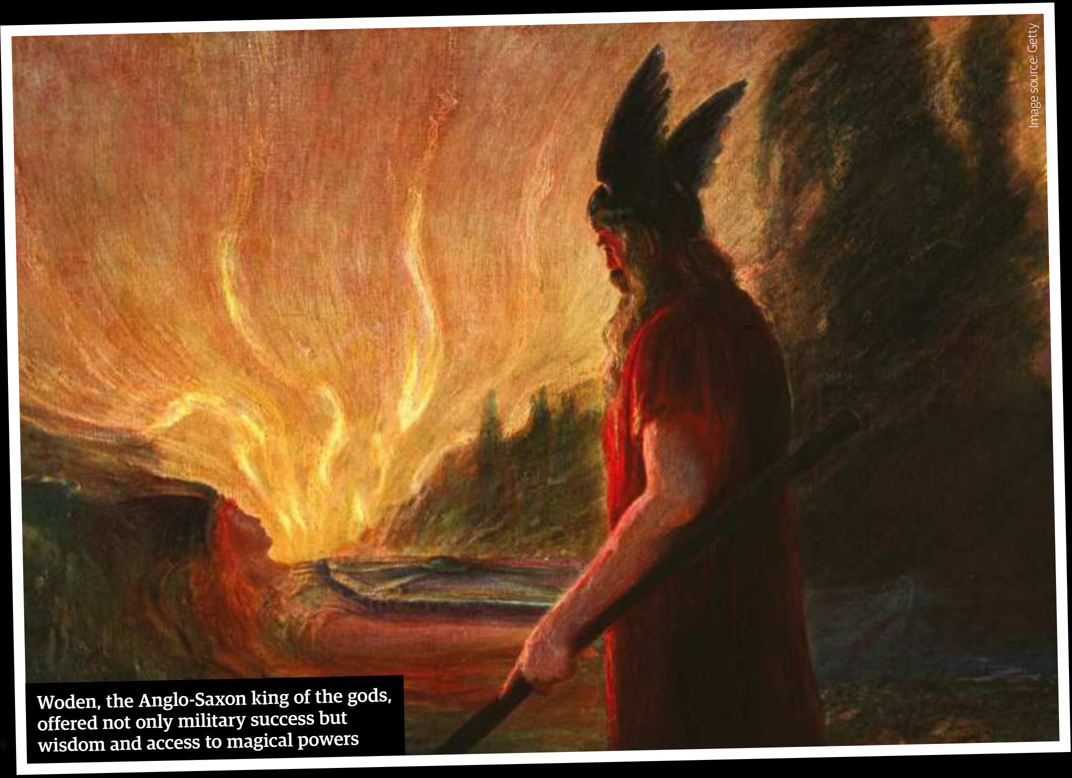
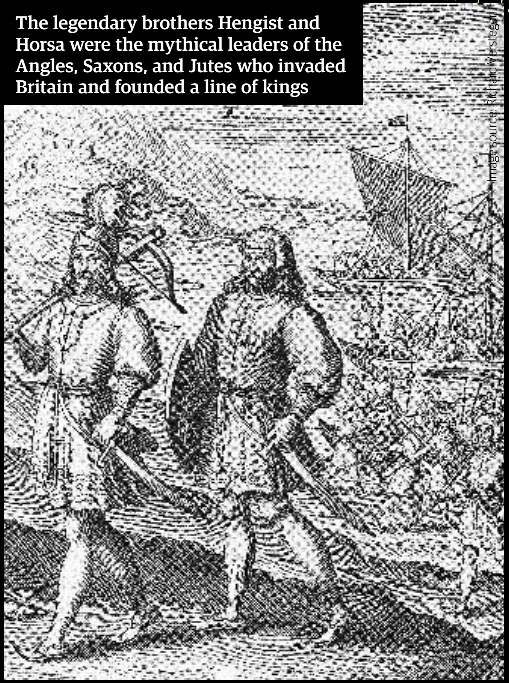


Image source: Getty

Woden, the Anglo-Saxon king of the gods, offered not only military success but wisdom and access to magical powers



The legendary brothers Hengist and Horsa were the mythical leaders of the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes who invaded Britain and founded a line of kings

Image source: Richard Verstegan

destroyed, but only the idols in them. Take holy water and sprinkle it in these shrines, build altars and place relics in them. For if the shrines are well built, it is essential that they should be changed from the worship of devils to the service of the true God."

As well as gods the Anglo-Saxon world was one inhabited by mighty heroes, strange other races like elves and dwarves, and threatening giants. The landscape itself might have been alive in some sense to the people of this period. Anglo-Saxon paganism may have incorporated animistic beliefs that spirits existed in various places, trees, and rocks. Offerings left in springs and woodlands could either be to the gods or to the spirits special to a single location.

> Farming was very important to Anglo-Saxon faith, which had specific spells and prayers for blessing and healing livestock and land

What occurred during Anglo-Saxon pagan worship is again an open question. Animal sacrifice seems to have been part of their ritual worship. Bede says that November was once known as Blod monath - Blood Month. "Blod-monath is the month of immolations, for it was in this month that the cattle which were to be slaughtered were dedicated to the gods". The modern English word 'Bless' is derived from the Old English 'Bletsian' meaning 'to consecrate with blood'. Like many early faiths Anglo-Saxon paganism may not have been as clean as modern religions, yet there was also joy in their religious practice.

Anglo-Saxon and Norse writings tell us of drinking rituals called symbel. Horns of mead or ale were raised and toasts made to those present in a chieftain's hall. Oaths of loyalty and friendship were spoken between those present and gifts given to guests. To ensure that a symbel did not descend into a drunken riot one person was appointed to keep it holy.

One of the events at a symbel was often the recitation of family lineages as a way of honouring both the living and the dead. In one list of royal ancestors Woden is given as the progenitor of the line. This was not an attempt to claim divine ancestry, but rather a later Christian attempt to cast the pagan gods of the Anglo-Saxons as merely humans of the deep past.

Christianity took some time to return to Britain. While some kings took to Christianity quickly, others hedged their bets. Bede records how King Rædwald of East Anglia kept a pagan idol in the same temple as a Christian altar. Many Christian kings lost their thrones to pagans, or were followed by pagan successors. Eventually though Christianity became the dominant faith of England.

Not all traces of Anglo-Saxon paganism could be exorcised from the country however. The days of the week that we use derive from the Anglo-Saxon names for them and their gods. Thursday is Thunor's day, Tuesday is Tiw's Day, and Wednesday still belongs to the most high god Woden.

In folklore the Anglo-Saxons have left their mark too. Wayland the Smith was a popular figure in Anglo-Saxon mythology. A famed maker of magical goods, he appears in several Old English poems, including *Beowulf* and his image is found carved in stones and the Franks Casket. At an ancient Neolithic barrow tomb dating from around 3,400 BCE known as Wayland's Smithy, local people in the 18th century believed an invisible spirit would shoe their horse if given an offering. Old faiths may linger long after the last believer has gone, it seems.

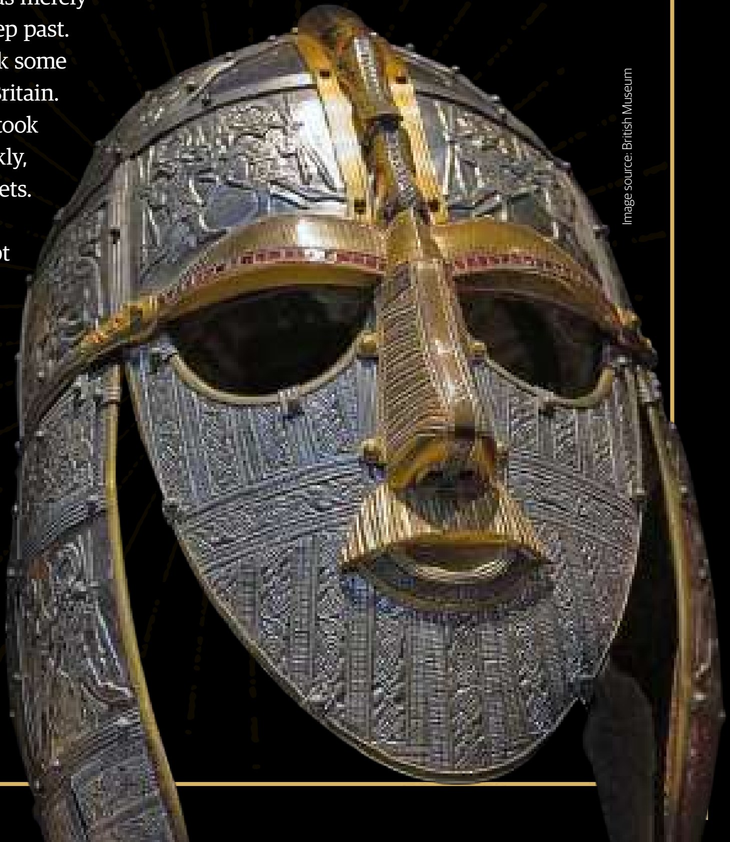


Image source: British Museum

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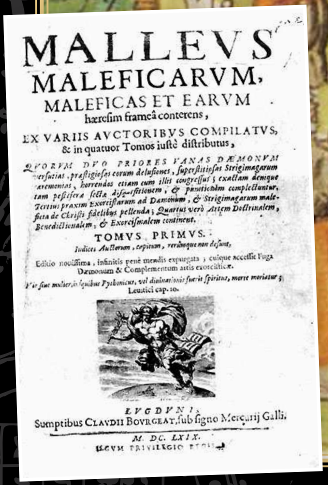

MALLEVS
MALEFICARVM,
MALEFICAS ET EARVM
hæreſim frameâ conterens,
EX VARIIS AVCTORIBVS COMPILATVS,
& in quatuor Tomos iuſtè diſtributus,
QVORVM DVO PRIORES VANAS DÆMONVM
verſutias, præſtigioſas eorum deluſiones, ſuperſtitioſas Strigimagarum
ceremonias, horrendos etiam cum illis congreſſus; exactam denique
tam peſtiferæ ſectæ diſquiſitionem, & punitionem complectuntur.
Tertius praxim Exorciſtarum ad Dæmonum, & Strigimagarum maleficia de Chriſti fidelibus pellenda; Quartus verò Artem Doctrinalem,
Benedictionalem, & Exorciſmalem continent.
TOMVS PRIMVS.
Indices Auctorum, capitum, rerùmque non deſunt.
Editio nouiſſima, infinitis penè mendis expurgata; cuique acceſſit Fuga
Dæmonum & Complementum artis exorciſticæ.
Vir ſiue mulier, in quibus Pythonicus, vel diuinationis fuerit ſpiritus, morte moriatur;
Leuitici cap. 10.

LVGDVNI,
Sumptibus CLAVDII BOVRGEAT, ſub ſigno Mercurij Galli.
M. DC. LXIX.
CVM PRIVILEGIO REGIS.

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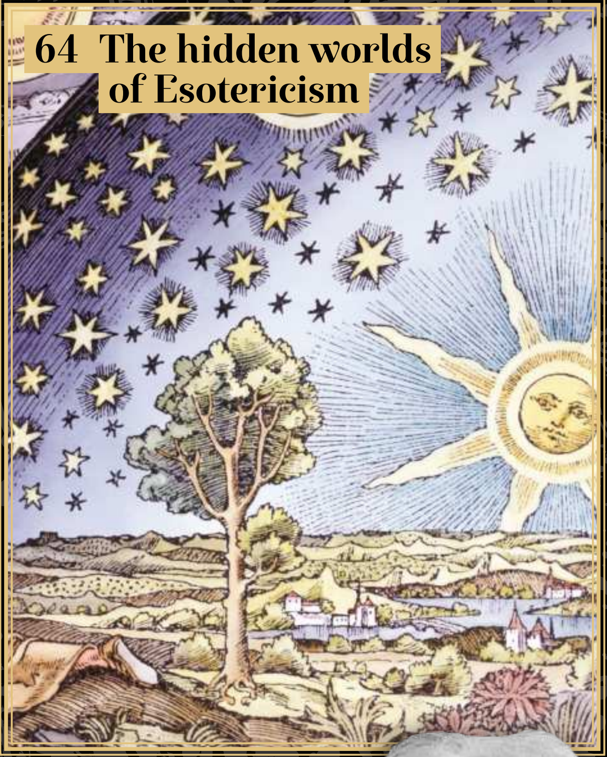
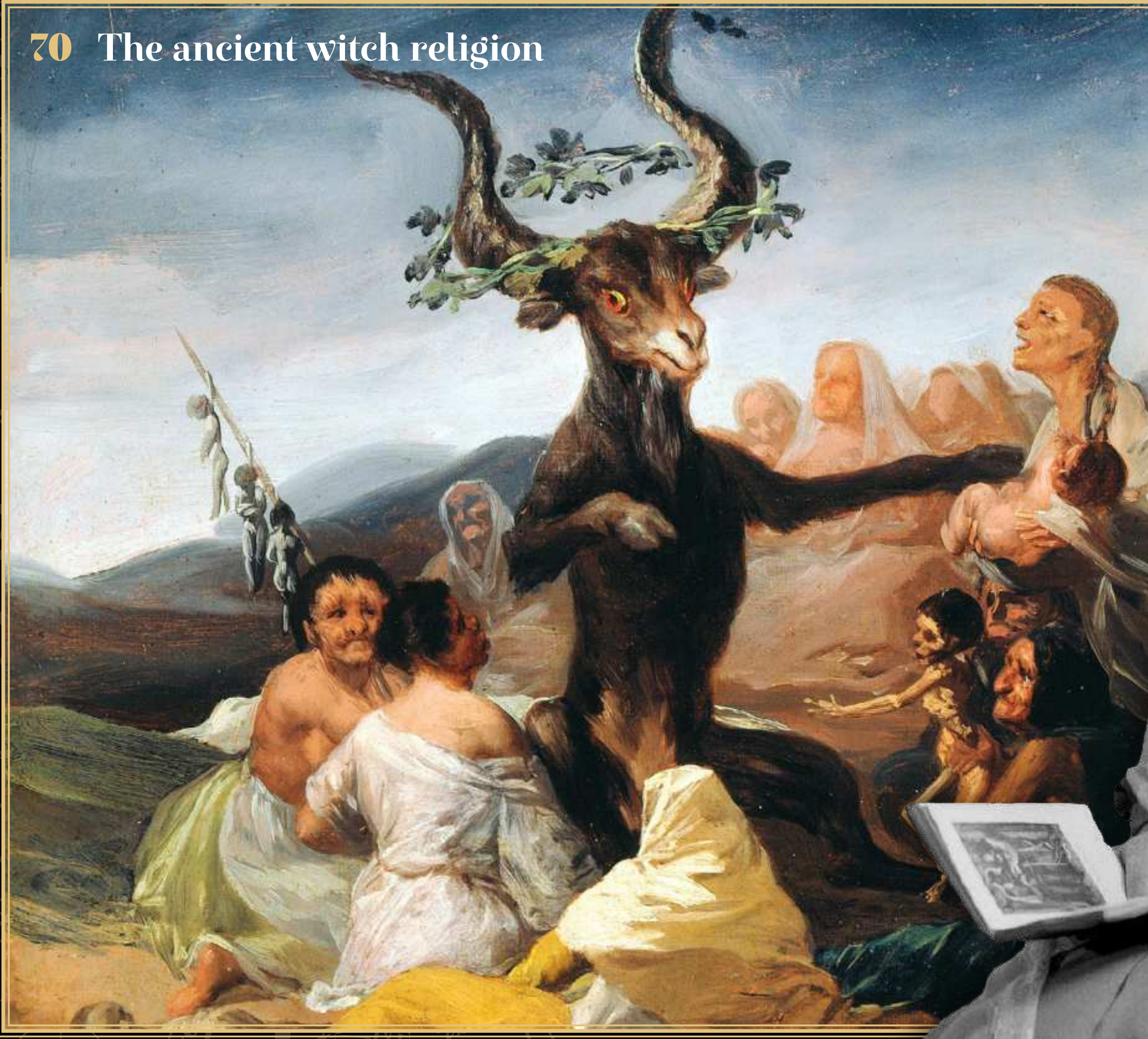


70 The ancient witch religion



# Syncretism: Melding pagan faiths

Ideas and concepts flow between religions, but how is it that sometimes whole gods are able to flit between pantheons?

Written by Ben Gazur

No religion is pure. Even those religions that are revealed directly by gods must exist in a human world in which ideas are exchanged every day. As believers react to new ideas from other faiths they refine their own opinions on the divine. Even denying the tenets of another faith can reshape an entire religion. Religions evolve and that is why studying the history of religion can be so profitable.

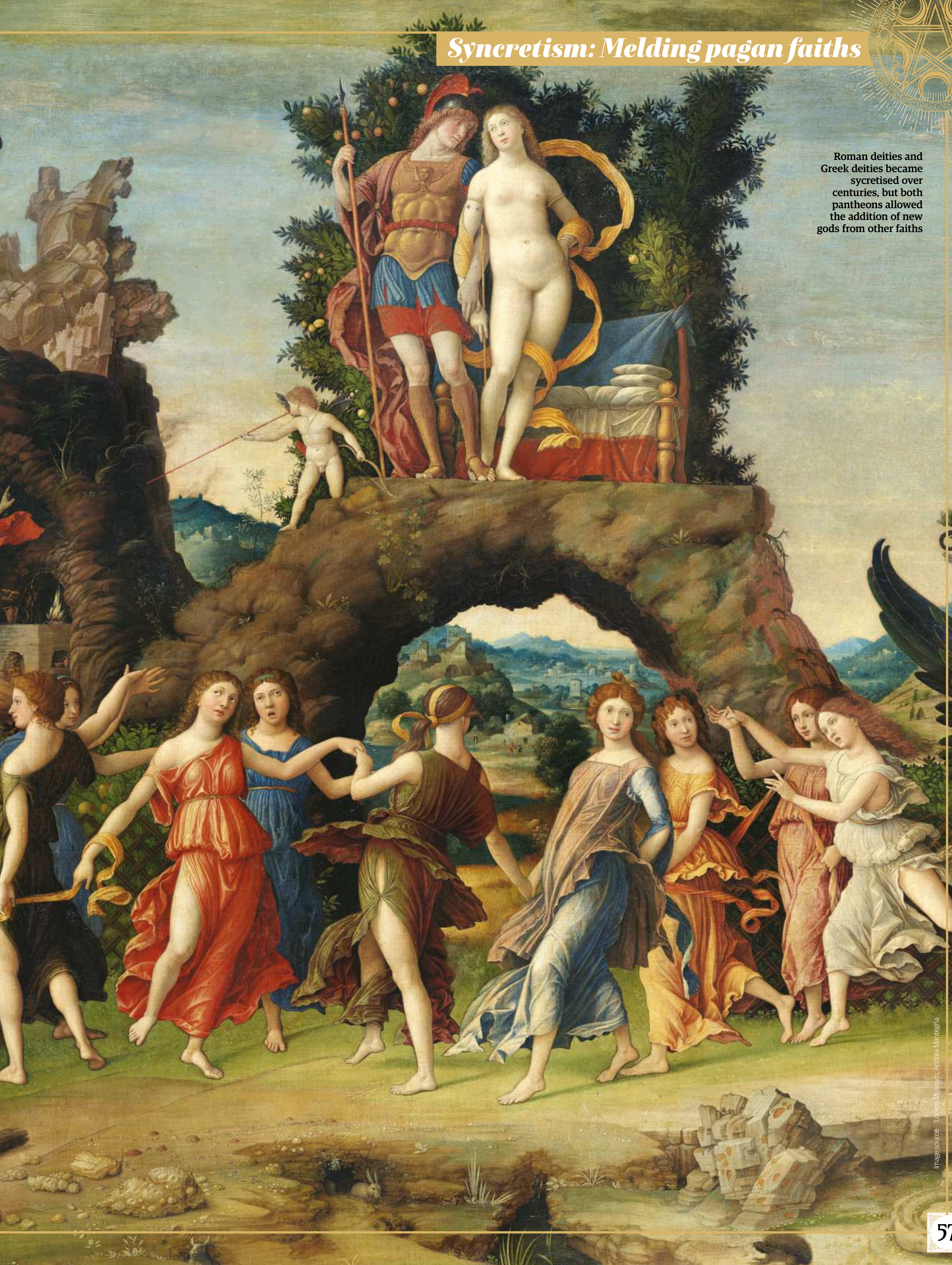
Sometimes when followers of different religions come into contact with each other they do not deny the truth that the others hold sacred. Instead of reacting against them they learn from each other and may exchange beliefs. This is called syncretism and it has been occurring for as long as humans have discussed their religions with each other.

It has been proposed that some myths preserve the notion of gods being imported into a new religion. The tales of Dionysus have him being born of a relationship between a mortal woman and Zeus within the mythological past, so he was a new god. The legends also speak of him coming from the east with a band of followers. Could this be a garbled version of a novel deity being added to the pantheon? Other Athenian Greek gods are given definite birthplaces outside of Athens such as Aphrodite, called Cypris - Lady of Cyprus.

Pagan and polytheistic religions are particularly adept at including new gods into their pantheon. The Greek and Romans were not dogmatic in their faith and had no texts that placed limitations on who they could worship. As new situations occurred new gods could appear to fulfil new roles. In the 5th century BCE an influx of Thracian immigrants led to the cult of the huntress goddess Bendis being introduced to Athens. This goddess shared many of the attributes and functions of the Greek goddess Artemis, though their worship was kept separate, but Bendis' festival was celebrated by Athenians and Thracians alike. There was more than enough room for both in Athenian theology.

The ability of the Greeks to recognise aspects of their own gods in the deities of other civilisations facilitated religious syncretism. When the historian Herodotus described cultures at the periphery of his world for a Greek audience, he did not hesitate to refer to the foreign gods by Greek names. Under his gaze Amon of the Egyptians becomes analogous to the Greek Zeus. When talking about the Scythians it is Papaois that he identifies as Zeus.

There may have been attempts to 'purify' Greek religion at times in Athens. Plutarch describes how "Diopeithes brought in a bill providing for the public impeachment of such as did not believe in gods, or who taught doctrines regarding the heavens". This action was directed against a natural philosopher who was attempting to describe the world without reference to the gods. Later, when Socrates was put on trial, one of the



Roman deities and Greek deities became sycretised over centuries, but both pantheons allowed the addition of new gods from other faiths

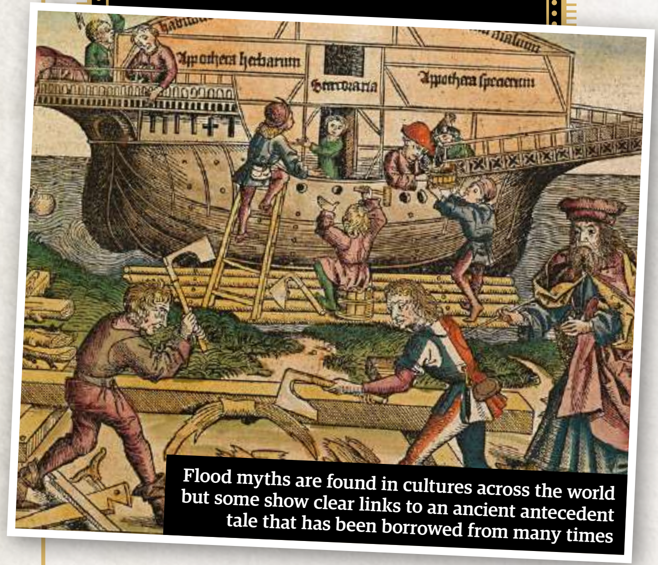
Image source: Louvre Museum; Andrea Mantegna

## The myth of the Flood

In the ancient days God became angry at humans and it was decided that they would be all wiped out in a flood. One man, however, was chosen to survive. He built a huge boat and boarded it with his family. The flood came and the world was drowned. Eventually the boat settled on a mountaintop…

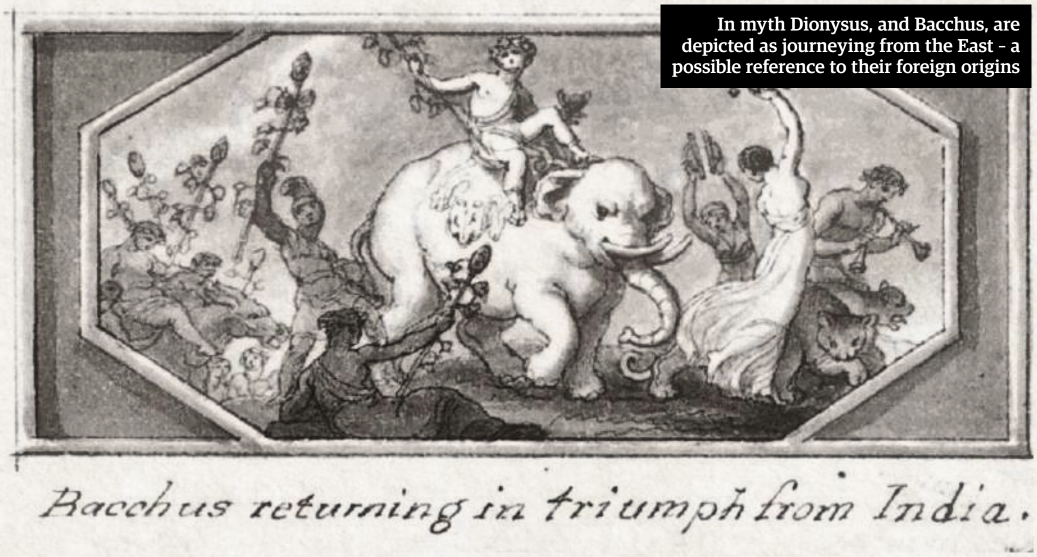
This story no doubt sounds familiar but it is not the flood narrative from the Bible but the one from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Written around the 18th century BCE it predates the tale of Noah by centuries. When the story of Utnapishtim, the human chosen to build the boat, was rediscovered, it sent shockwaves through the Christian world.

It is not just gods that can be transferred between faiths but stories too. The tale as told in *Gilgamesh* has many different resonances to that in the Bible and would have had a different meaning for those who heard it. It is an interesting aspect of syncretism that though sharing ideas and even gods may help to bring people closer it is impossible to be certain they mean the same thing to everyone.



Flood myths are found in cultures across the world but some show clear links to an ancient antecedent tale that has been borrowed from many times

Image source: Michel Wolgemut, Wilhelm Pleydenwurff


Bacchus returning in triumph from India.

In myth Dionysus, and Bacchus, are depicted as journeying from the East – a possible reference to their foreign origins

> "Roman paganism was sometimes deployed to ensure cohesion across the Empire"

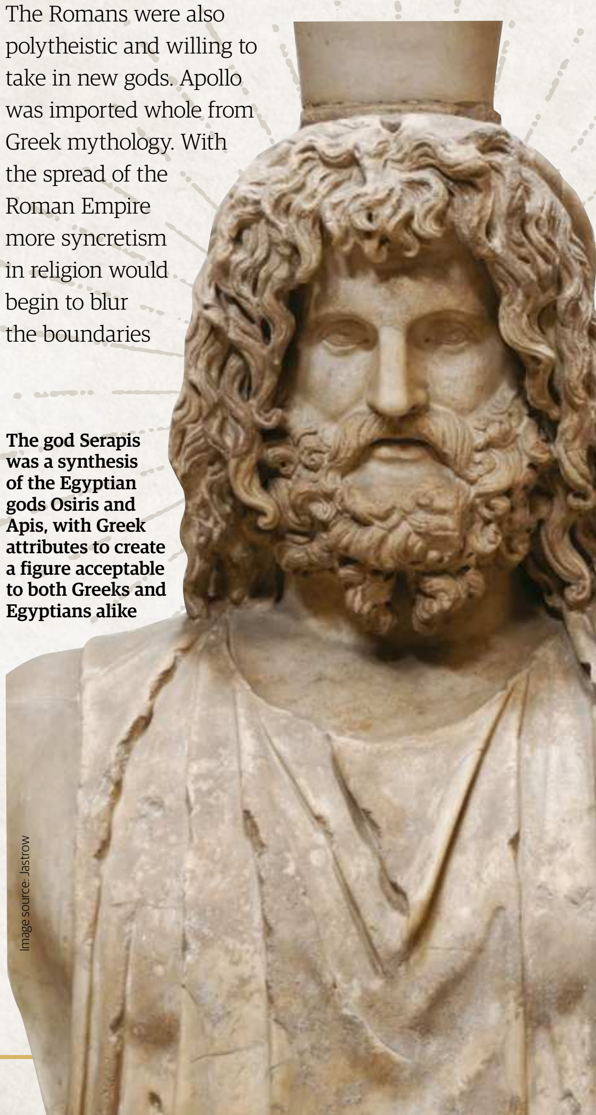
charges against him was worshipping gods that were not native to the city. Yet despite these actions the Greeks would continue to recognise gods from other pantheons.

Part of the reason that the Greeks were so willing to accept new gods was that they were travellers, explorers, and conquerors. Alexander the Great ruled a vast polyglot empire that was home to many religions. When he visited his new dominions he would show respect for his subjects by participating in their rites and rituals. In Egypt he crossed the desert to the oracle of Amon at Siwa. Here he was told that he was the child of a god. From Alexander's faith in the truth of this oracle the worship of a god called Zeus Amon who melded a Greek deity with an Egyptian god would develop.

In the fracturing of Alexander's empires in the wake of his death, more merging of pagan religions occurred. Ptolemy, one of Alexander's generals and successors, became Pharaoh of Egypt. There he introduced the cult of the god Serapis. Serapis was a synthesis of the Egyptian gods Osiris and Apis, but was presented in the Greek style. His worship was meant to help unite Ptolemy's Greek and Egyptian subjects. As Hellenistic pagans mixed with Asians, syncretism occurred outwards. The bodhisattva Vajrapani was a fearsome protector of Buddha and in central Asia came to be represented by the equally strong Greek hero-god Herakles.

Greek city states had spread throughout the Mediterranean world in the centuries before Alexander. Trade with local populations went beyond food and goods. In the Italian peninsula Greek religion was readily taken up. Some of the gods of the Greeks and the Italians were similar because they had both developed from the earlier Proto-Indo-European pantheon. Zeus the Father ('Zeus Pater') and Jupiter even shared similar names. There were, however, clear differences between the two pantheons.

In Roman religion the god Mars was an ancestor of the martial Roman people, while the warrior god Ares was a relatively minor god to the Greeks. The Romans were also polytheistic and willing to take in new gods. Apollo was imported whole from Greek mythology. With the spread of the Roman Empire more syncretism in religion would begin to blur the boundaries



**The god Serapis was a synthesis of the Egyptian gods Osiris and Apis, with Greek attributes to create a figure acceptable to both Greeks and Egyptians alike**

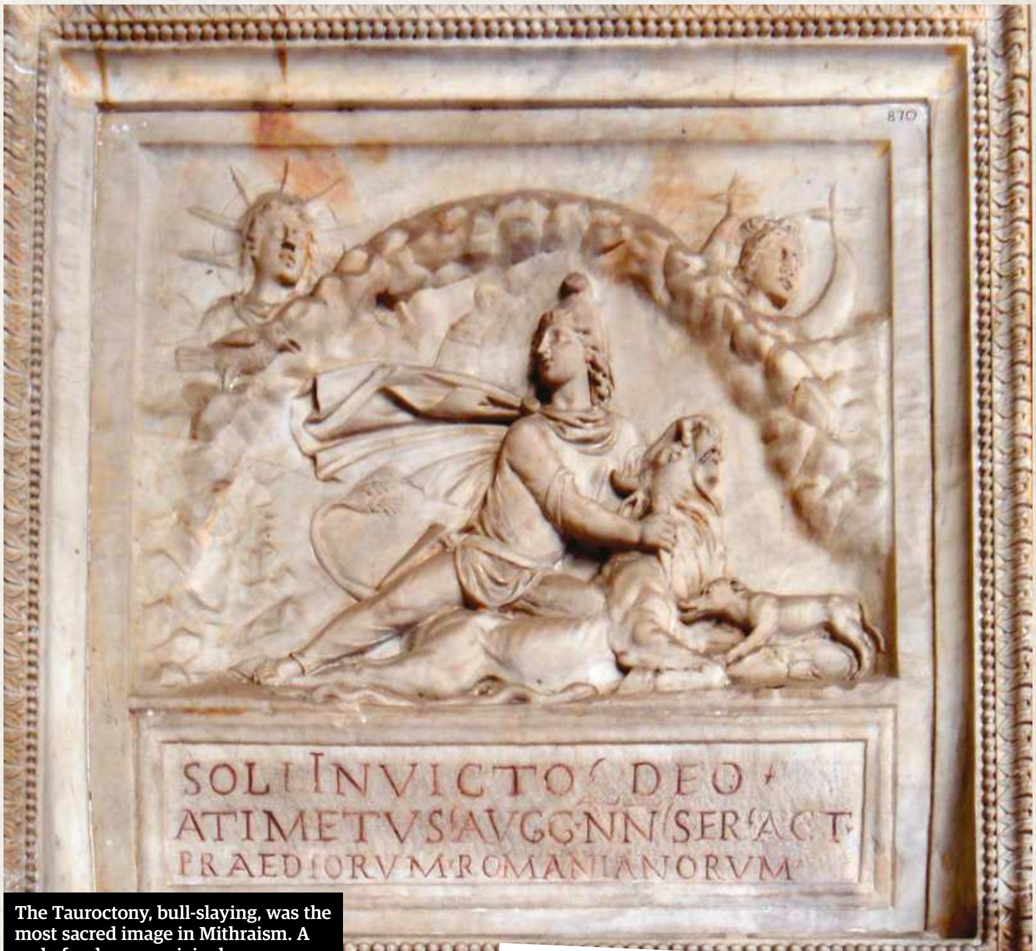
Image source: Jastrow

between conquerors and conquered, as soldiers (and their families) from new Imperial territories, brought their beliefs into the Empire.

The mysteries of Isis enjoyed great popularity in both Greek and Roman societies. Mystery cults were a common part of the religious scene that allowed people to come unusually close to the gods. While public worship of the gods in ceremonies often kept the crowd distant from the deity, in a mystery cult re-enactments of the god's story made a personal connection to the divine. Isis, originally an Egyptian goddess, underwent Hellenisation under the Ptolemies and in this 'civilised' guise entered the Greek world.

Other mystery cults, like that of Mithras, spread across the Roman world. The Mithraeum in London that is now open to the public is just one of hundreds of underground temples dedicated to Mithras that have been unearthed. Wherever worship of the god began (likely Persia) he ended up in lands unimaginable to his original priests.

Roman paganism was sometimes deployed to ensure peace and cohesion across an empire with many different peoples in it. The god Apollo, whom the Romans had taken from the Greeks, was syncretised to the Celtic god Belenus. Belenus seems to have driven the sun across the sky in his chariot, as Apollo is said to have done, so it was easy for the Romans to make the identification of them as the same god. Yet an act meant to bring outsiders into their religious sphere also introduced the Romans to the worship of Belenus. Inscriptions to him have been found in Italy itself.



**The Tauroctony, bull-slaying, was the most sacred image in Mithraism. A god of unknown origin, he was soon adopted by many Roman pagans**

Image source: Musei Vatican, Lalupa

**A modern Pagan may worship gods from one historical pantheon or many, but this can lead to accusations of cultural appropriation**

Image source: Gunnar Creutz

While polytheistic religions show a rare adaptability to the introduction of new religions, syncretism can occur even in faiths that seem to deny the existence of other gods. Some gods, like the Irish Brigid, were incorporated directly into Christian faith by making her into a saint. Thanks to the global reach of many faiths today it is possible to access deities from cultures that have nothing to do with the place of one's birth. A Christian in Korea may have no idea who the goddess Brigid was when they call on Saint Brigid to intercede on their behalf.

This disconnect between believers and belief has been under ever closer examination with the current discussions surrounding cultural appropriation. While no one denies that our existence is enriched by the trading of views and ideas between cultures, some see the adoption of practices held sacred by a society, especially by people without a proper understanding of them, as deeply hurtful. When a holy item or rite is appropriated from a marginalised culture it can feel as if their culture is being stolen and erased, not honoured.

> Syncretism has both good and bad sides. It can teach us more about how cultures relate, but there's always a danger of appropriation

This can be problematic for modern Pagans. Though some claim that paganism in various forms existed in Europe for centuries throughout the Christian period, most scholars believe that modern European Pagan faiths are reconstructions or synthetic creations. Polytheistic reconstructionists have formed Pagan religions around the remaining folklore and practices of cultures as diverse as the Greeks, the Norse, and the Aztec. Some question how these faiths can claim to be identical to the original when so much has been lost. Many new followers of old beliefs say that their devotion and faith is sufficient to make them authentic followers of their brand of Paganism. For modern Pagans who follow an eclectic pantheon, the charge of cultural appropriation can feel particularly hard to answer. A person may feel drawn to worship the Celtic Danu, the Roman Antinous, and the Inuit Sedna, all at the same time. Are they choosing to wear their faith in other cultures' gods as a fashion, or are they honestly expressing a powerful conviction in the power of these beings? This is a question all modern Pagans must consider, and find a heartfelt and honest answer to.

# Lighting the pyre

How medieval Europe went from disbelieving in the power of witches to fearing a sinister secret society bent on subverting the masses

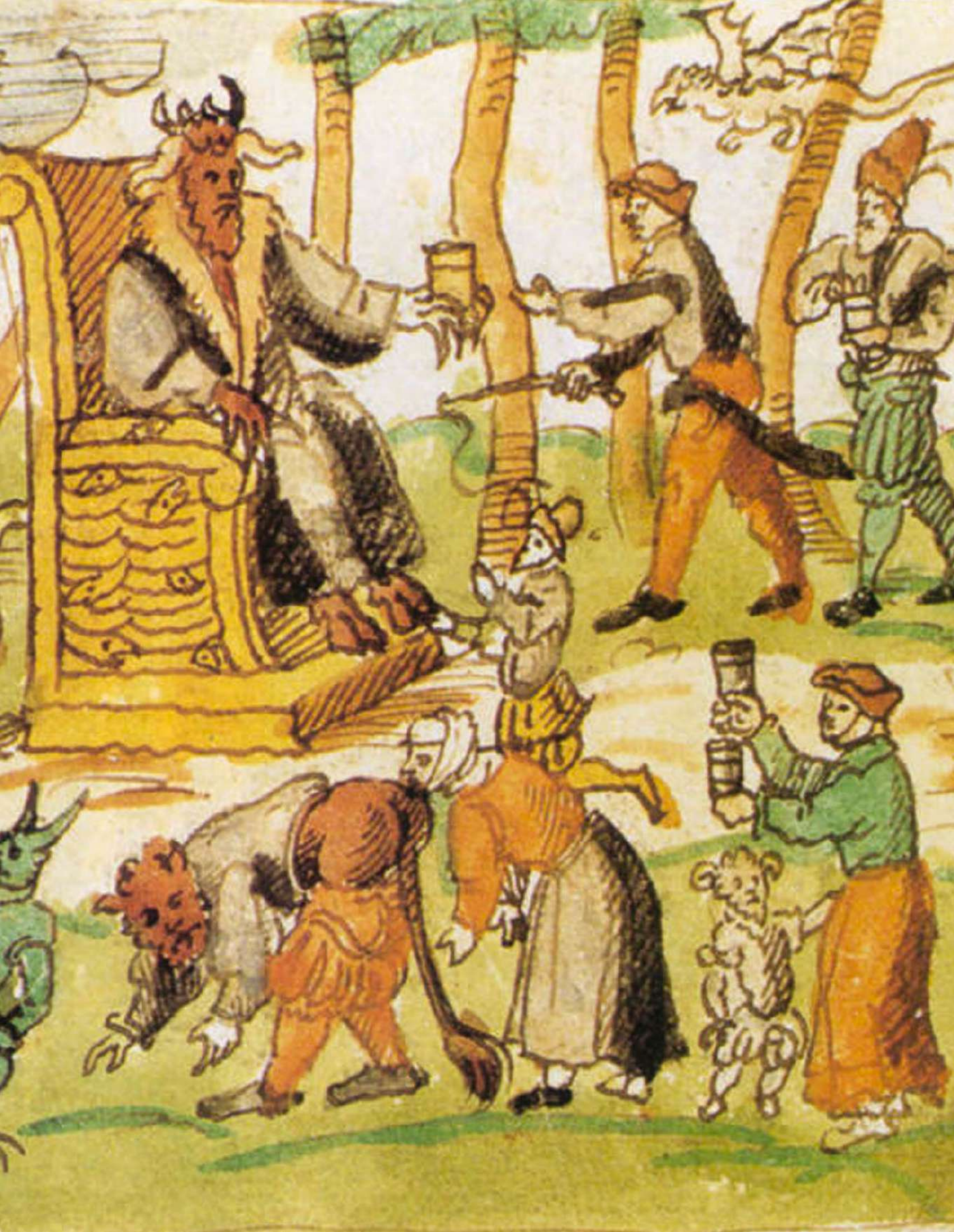
Written by Edoardo Albert

The Middle Ages get a bad press in all sorts of areas. In the history of witchcraft, the idea of zealous medieval inquisitors consigning an old crone to the flames because of the slander of a neighbour and a reputation as a 'wise woman' is well established – and not always true.

In fact, the witch trials and witch crazes of Europe and North America were a product of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, when men, having cast off the shackles of medieval superstition, became convinced through all the best and most scientific of arguments that there really were witches in their midst and resolved to burn them out. Think of the treatment of magic in medieval romances as compared to Shakespeare and Jacobean drama. In the former, there is magic, but it is fantastical – magical, no less. But as we enter Elizabethan and Jacobean Britain, magic moves from the realm of fantasy to a present danger. In medieval times, to encounter magic meant to enter the realm of faerie; in Shakespeare and Marlowe it meant the necromancer next door.

During that vast expanse of time from the fall of the Western Roman Empire to the dawning of the Renaissance, the idea of witchcraft was both popularly accepted and officially dismissed. This was in distinction to Roman law, which had stipulated that sorcerers be executed, although that did not stop many an emperor from including soothsayers in their private entourages. Curse tablets (execrations against some person the writer wished to harm) were common throughout the Roman period and an accepted form of redress in an age without courts or police forces. But should someone go further and contract a necromancer to curse a person to death, then Roman law specified death by burning as punishment for such a crime.

In comparison, the law code promulgated by Charlemagne in the 8th century stipulated



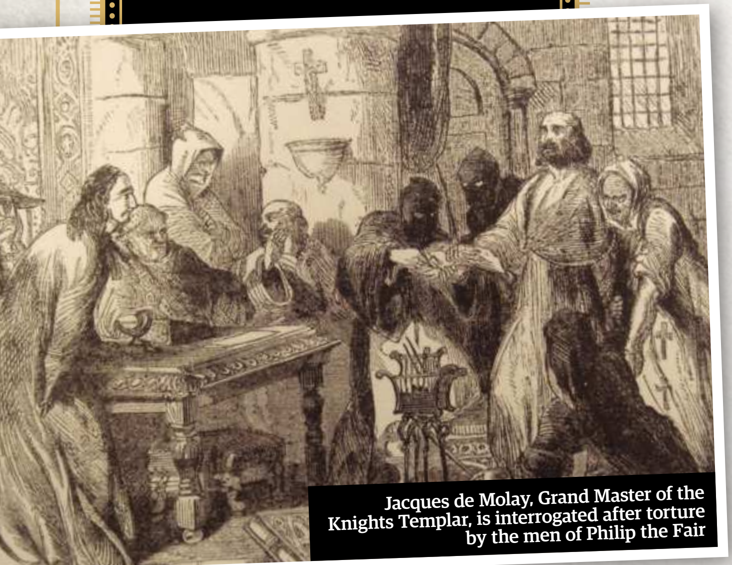
that if the accused, believing someone to be a witch, had that person burned, then the accused should be executed for murder. Such a turnaround conformed with the teaching of the Catholic Church, which stated that witchcraft was superstition. For according to no less an authority than St Augustine, and as formulated in the *Canon Episcopi* in the 10th century, the supposed power of witches was purely illusory: it was the persistent belief in the reality of these powers that was heretical. The Canon, which was part of church law, did mention that some women believed that they could fly through the night on the backs of fell beasts, but it labelled such women as 'foolish' and 'stupid' for believing that they could do such things. The fault, according to the Canon, lay in being tricked by the Devil into believing such powers were real, rather than the reality of witching powers, which it labelled as illusory.

## From Templars to trials

One of the key events in European history that helped to conflate the ideas of sorcery and heresy was the condemnation of the Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon, the Knights Templar.

King Philip the Fair of France, having determined to destroy the Knights Templar to obtain their resources and negate his huge debts to them, needed a pretext. The Knights had a reputation for secrecy that had allowed rumours as to their practices to flourish. At dawn on Friday, 13 October, 1307, Philip's agents arrested the master of the order and its highest officers and put them to torture in various locations. The warrant for their arrest began with a telling phrase: "God is not pleased. We have enemies of the faith in the kingdom."

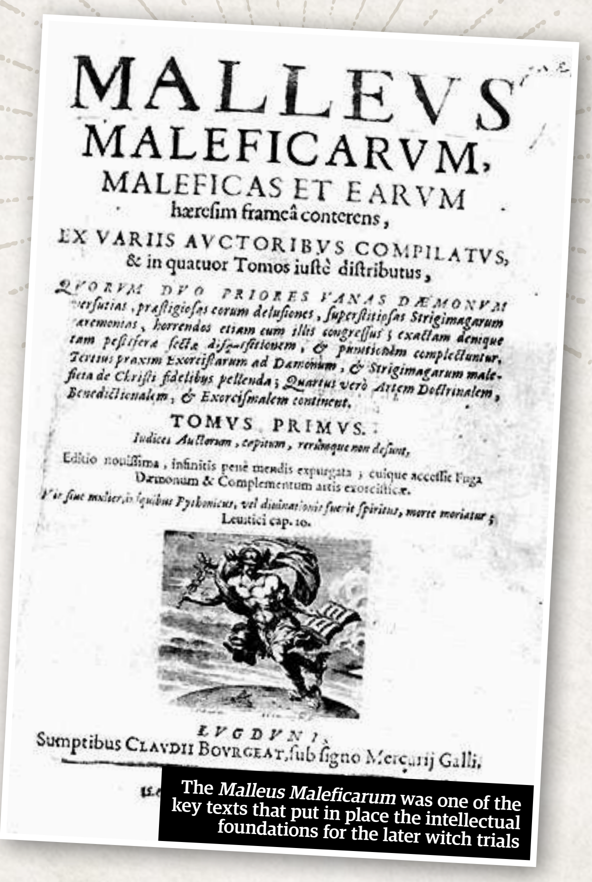
Under unimaginable duress they confessed to heretical acts, blasphemy and sorcery. Although there was little basis in these accusations, they provided sufficient pretext, when combined with the pressure Philip placed on the trial judges, to ensure the condemnation and execution of Jacques de Molay, the order's Grand Master, and the suppression of the Templars. As well as connecting sorcery and heresy in the European mind, it also prefigured another key aspect of later witchcraft trials: that the prosecuting authority was not the church but the secular authorities.


Jacques de Molay, Grand Master of the Knights Templar, is interrogated after torture by the men of Philip the Fair

However, common folk remedies and charms of the time could, when viewed with the more suspicious eyes of later witch hunters, easily come to be viewed as magical. For instance, as a ward against lightning people wore sealskin, or a farmer might ask a virgin to plant a new olive tree to ensure a fruitful crop. But these were all largely practices of the common people. The practice of sorcery in the middle ages was a real concern, but since it required learning and education the people accused of it were largely male, since few women could read Latin, the language of scholarship.

Necromancy, as this form of sorcery was called, involved summoning the dead. Belief in its possibility was widespread in the middle ages, having its foundation in the story of Samuel and the witch of Endor. Saul, king of Israel, facing an invasion by the Philistines and still tormented by his envy for the young David, repaired to a witch and required her to summon the spirit of the prophet Samuel from the dead. She did so, and the spirit of Samuel told Saul that he had forfeited God's warrant and that on the morrow the Philistines would utterly defeat his army and he himself would die. With this Biblical warrant, the possibility of summoning the dead for the purposes of prophecy and the unveiling of mysteries was accepted, but the means to accomplish this were generally written in grimoires, magical text books that told, sometimes in code and usually in Latin, how to perform the requisite ceremonies. So any putative necromancer needed not only to be able to read, but to read Latin too. As such, records show that the majority of people accused of necromancy in the first half of the 14th century were men.

However, by the 15th and 16th centuries, beliefs had begun to change. The reasons for this shift are complex, but a major contributory factor were the profound dislocations produced by the recurring outbreaks of the Black Death in the 14th century and the consequent perceived spread of heretical sects. To the medieval worldview, such a calamity required a cause in some falling away by society from God's laws, and thus the search for scapegoats began. The first victims were Europe's Jewish communities, but in the febrile atmosphere widespread among the survivors, suspicions spread more widely. So we find that church authorities, having initially pooh-poohed the reality of sorcerous powers in earlier times, began to entertain the belief that these powers were real. The idea of the witches' sabbat, where women entered into a pact with the Devil and committed all sorts of terrible acts, began to be accepted as true by society.


MALLEVS
MALEFICARVM,
MALEFICAS ET EARVM
hæreſim frameâ conterens,
EX VARIIS AVCTORIBVS COMPILATVS,
& in quatuor Tomos iuſtè diſtributus,
QVORVM DVO PRIORES VANAS DÆMONVM
verſutias, præſtigioſas eorum deluſiones, ſuperſtitioſas Strigimagarum
cæremonias, horrendos etiam cum illis congreſſus; exactam denique
tam peſtiferæ ſectæ diſquiſitionem, & punitionem complectuntur.
Tertius praxim Exorciſtarum ad Dæmonum, & Strigimagarum male-
ficia de Chriſti fidelibus pellenda; Quartus verò Artem Doctrinalem,
Benedictionalem, & Exorciſmalem continent.
TOMVS PRIMVS.
Indices Auctorum, capitum, rerùmque non deſunt.
Editio nouiſſima, infinitis penè mendis expurgata; cuique acceſſit Fuga
Dæmonum & Complementum artis exorciſticæ.
Vir ſiue mulier, in quibus Pythonicus, vel diuinationis fuerit ſpiritus, morte moriatur;
Leuitici cap. 10.
LVGDVNI,
Sumptibus CLAVDII BOVRGEAT, ſub ſigno Mercurij Galli.

The *Malleus Maleficarum* was one of the key texts that put in place the intellectual foundations for the later witch trials

Some scholars argue there really was a witch cult composed of marginalised people who preserved some ancient beliefs

With the idea of a pact with the Devil in place, it became possible to countenance uneducated people being able to perform the powerful acts of magic that had previously only been associated with necromancers. After all, while a simple village woman would obviously not have the knowledge necessary for casting spells, once she had made a pact with the Devil, he could supply the knowledge that the witch lacked. Theologians began to work out the implications of such ideas, with disastrous consequences. Covens of witches, as opposed to solitary practitioners, implied an organised, secret cult, and one antithetical to society. What was worse, this cult was hidden within the body of believers: the enemy was within. The response was an explosion in witch trials.

Before 1420, there are less than a 100 recorded witch trials in Europe. Over the next ten years, the number of accusations jumps, with some 200 people having been executed. Where before magic had been an illusion caused through the Devil's trickery, now it became an active collusion with Satan and, as such, the worst sort of heresy. With the link between witchcraft, the Devil and heresy established to the satisfaction of Europe's educated elites, the elements were in place for the unleashing of all-too-human demons.

Even so, the idea would likely have remained confined to the clerical and secular elites of Europe if not for one transformative and, in this case, disastrous invention: the printing press. We are used to thinking of the printing press as one of the most beneficial inventions in human history, but in one area at least, it served a malevolent function. For it was through the widespread dissemination of books and pamphlets made possible by this new-fangled invention that the idea of the evil witch in league with the Devil spread through all reaches of European society.

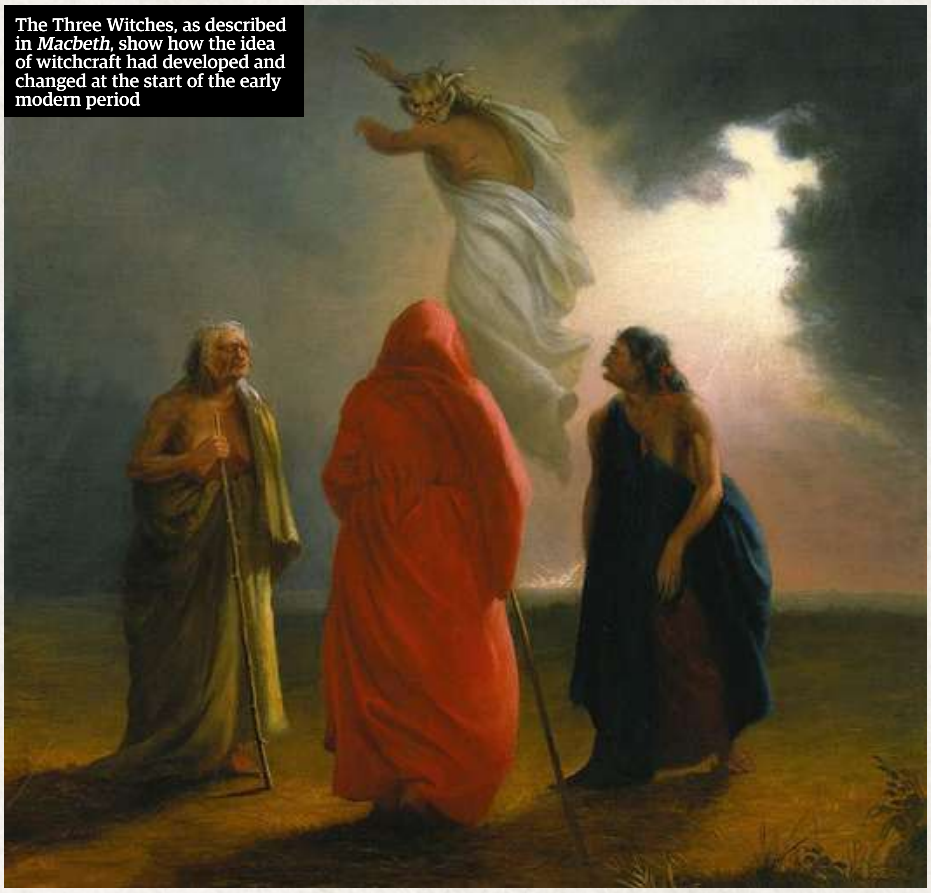
In 1472, Heinrich Kramer's *Malleus Maleficarum* (*Hammer of Witches*) was published, synthesising the Devil's brew of ideas that would inform the later European witch trials, and in particular the identification of women with witches. Kramer believed that women's spiritual weakness and a proclivity to evil that he traced back to Eve dangling the apple of temptation under Adam's nose made them naturally susceptible to the Devil's blandishments. Couple this with woodcut illustrations of hags and crones riding broomsticks, and the popularisation of witches and sorcery in contemporary culture that reached its literary heights in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, and the confluence of ideas that formed the early modern idea of the witch was nearly complete.

Accusations of witchcraft were generally levelled by neighbours, so the panic may have been due to village tensions

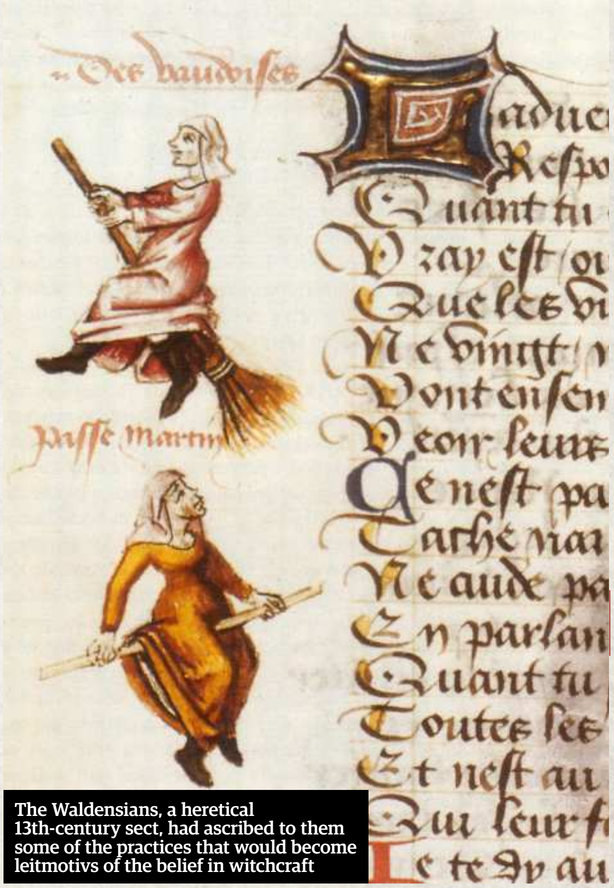
"What was worse, this cult was hidden within the body of believers: the enemy was within"

All that was needed was the final ingredient: the conviction of the educated classes that magic was in fact real. This conviction was provided by, of all people, the Renaissance humanists. For in their rediscovery of ancient knowledge, among the most prized of their findings was the ancient Hermetic wisdom of Egypt, and the speculations of the Pythagoreans and Kabbalists. Humanists such as Marsilio Ficino and Erasmus viewed this as high magic, but once that was admitted as real then its counterpart, black magic, became its necessary and obvious counterpoint.

In a time when the educated elites were busy dabbling in numerology and astrology, it was easy to imagine similar but diabolical groups gathered in covens for the ruin of the world. The stage was set for the age of witch persecutions.



**The Three Witches, as described in *Macbeth*, show how the idea of witchcraft had developed and changed at the start of the early modern period**



**The Waldensians, a heretical 13th-century sect, had ascribed to them some of the practices that would become leitmotivs of the belief in witchcraft**

# The hidden worlds of Esotericism

What is the nature of reality? To uncover the truth you'll have to join one of the many orders from history who know what is really going on

Written by Ben Gazur

Humans have always hungered to have secrets revealed to them. To hold hidden knowledge is to set oneself apart from the common herd of humanity. Many religions and societies have certain rituals, roles, and truths that are concealed from the outside world. Western Esotericism deals with all those movements through European history that have offered members new paths to universal wisdom, access to the gods, and uncanny powers.

Esotericism derives from a Greek word meaning 'belonging to an inner circle'. Throughout the ancient world there were many groups that worked to keep their knowledge secret. In the pagan world mystery cults were common. At the Eleusinian Mysteries initiates were led underground and sworn to absolute secrecy about all that took place. So effective was the injunction to silence that now we are left with only scattered fragments of what rites may have occurred in the dark caverns. Mystery cults were popular for the exclusivity they offered but they also provided those who joined with spiritual benefits. Many mystery cults showed the death and rebirth of a god or goddess. By taking part in this resurrection worshippers were often offered a better afterlife than the gloomy underworld most people were bound for in Greek religion.

Some mystery cults gave their followers tips on getting to the good places in the afterlife, or charms to ward off evils they would find there. Orphicism saw the dead buried with golden tablets with instructions on how to keep your mind intact in the underworld. The mystery cult of Isis seems to have given people a way to be reborn into a new life to avoid permanent death.

Religious esotericism was only one form of hidden knowledge in the ancient world. Philosophers could be equally cryptic with their beliefs. The Pythagoreans moved into communes together so that outsiders would be excluded from their teachings. The Pythagoreans also taught about the transmigration of the soul, cycles of rebirth and the path to move ever upwards with each life. They treated their mathematical discoveries with as much secrecy as their divine revelations. Hippasus left the Pythagorean school and told the world about dodecahedrons and was promptly drowned at sea for his impiety.

Even Plato, who wrote down his theories for others to read, was not free from the urge to conceal certain teachings. In the possibly spurious *Second Epistle of Plato* he warns a follower never to write down certain doctrines and to burn the letter. The accepted dialogues of Plato point to a similar esotericism. His famous Allegory of the Cave tells us that there are higher realms beyond our perceptions, which is a message many modern Pagans would agree with. Only those that have been freed from the world of the senses can lead others to knowledge of the true world.

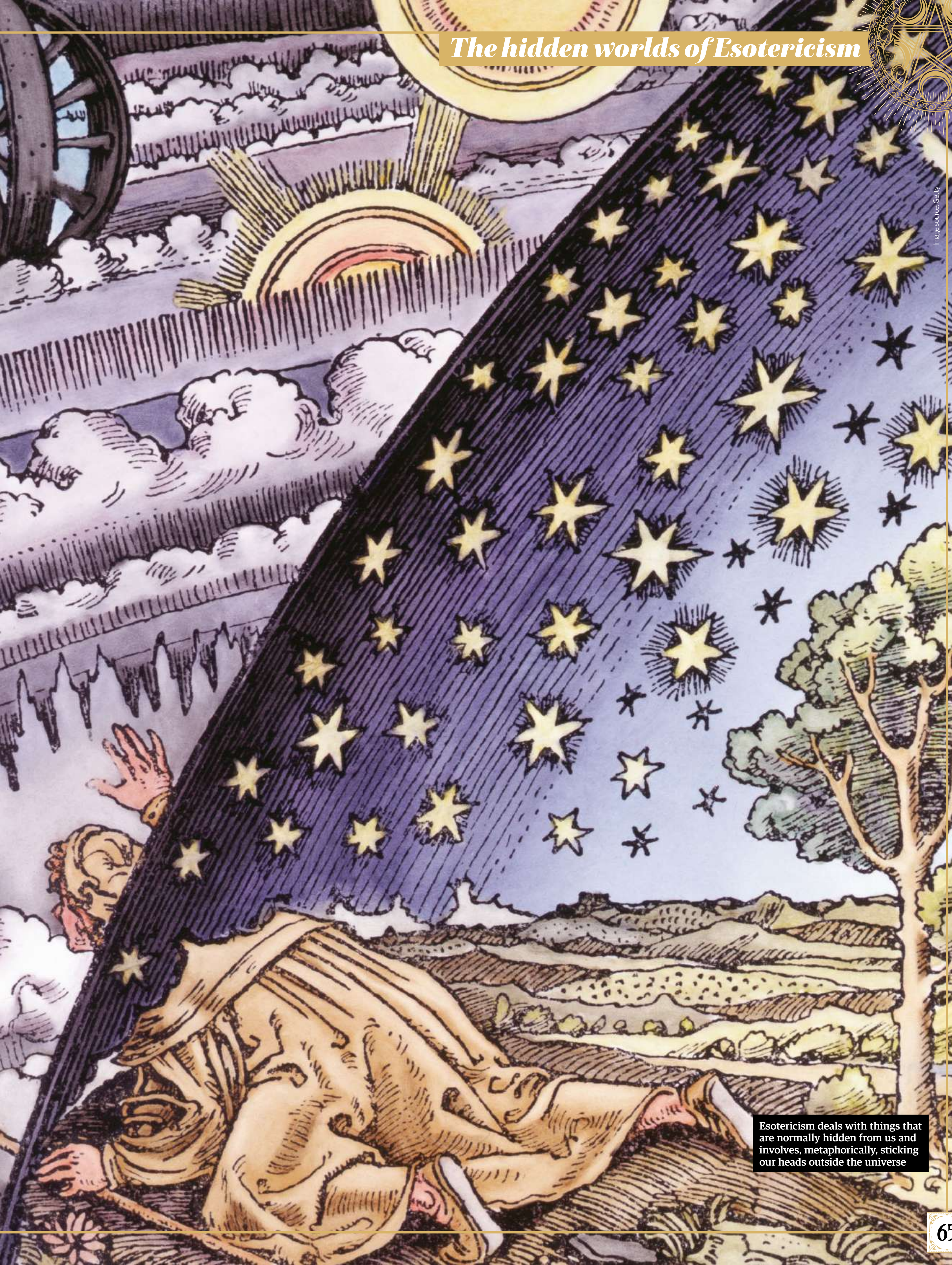


Image source: Getty

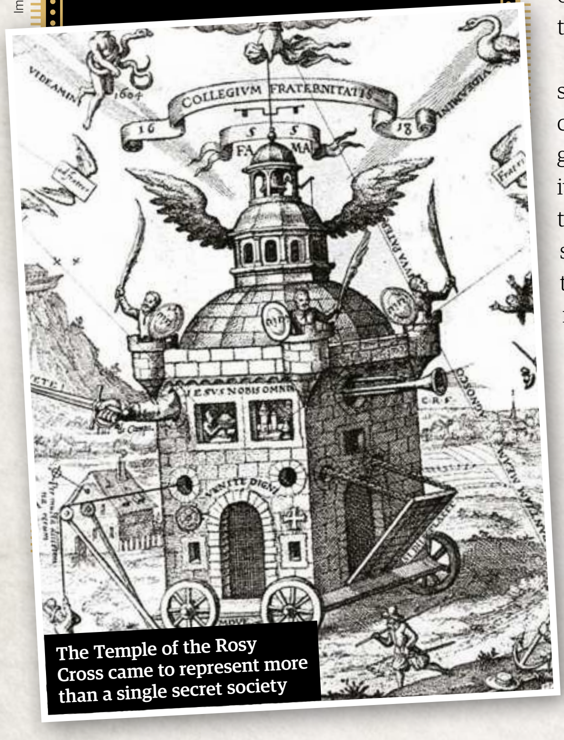
Esotericism deals with things that are normally hidden from us and involves, metaphorically, sticking our heads outside the universe

## Rosicrucianism: Holy order or hoax?

IIn 1614 an anonymous book was published in Germany under the title *Fama Fraternitatis Rosae Crucis* – The Fame of the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross. This text revealed the travels of a doctor in the Holy Land where he learned the true secrets of religion from secret Arabic masters and returned to form the society of the Rosy Cross, or Rosicrucians, as they would become known.

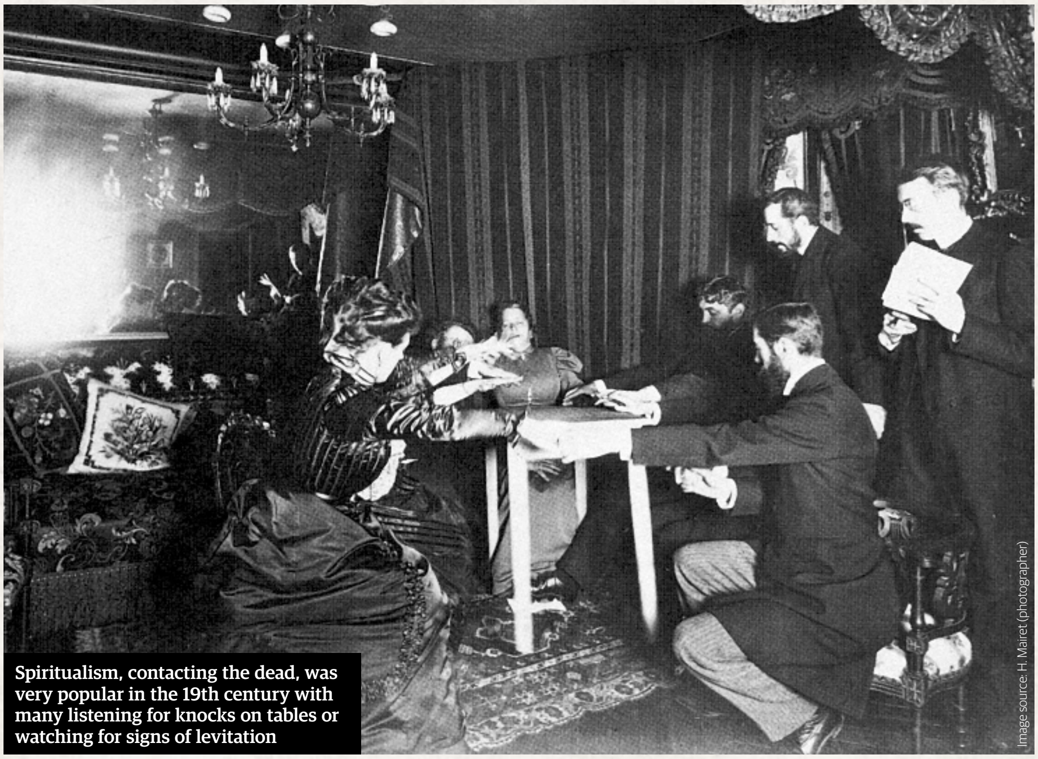
Other books soon followed that developed the theories of brotherhood. Rosicrucianism, like Kabbalah, was supposed to reveal the one truth that lay behind all faiths. Using allegories, symbols, and esoteric revelations, they offered insights into natural science, magic, and ultimately God.

Many people at the time of the first publication took the book as an allegorical rather than a true telling of a real journey. One author of a later Rosicrucian text simply referred to it as a 'ludibrium' – a little joke. Despite most people agreeing that the brotherhood never really existed it has had a large effect on many who created esoteric societies afterwards. The idea of a secret group of individuals seeking to improve the world, yet operating without the knowledge of the rest of mankind, was appealing to many thinkers. It would allow them to pursue knowledge without the need to deal overly much with the messy business of actually interacting with the hoi polloi.



The Temple of the Rosy Cross came to represent more than a single secret society

Image source: H.T. Schweighart, Speculum sophicum Rhodostauroticum (1604)



Spiritualism, contacting the dead, was very popular in the 19th century with many listening for knocks on tables or watching for signs of levitation

Image source: H. Mairet (photographer)

> "The pathway of knowledge to higher powers is the essence of Esotericism"

Later followers of Plato would go further than seeking mere knowledge of the divine: they would seek unity with it. Plotinus called this joining with the divine 'henosis'. From henosis the practice of Theurgy developed. Because the world of physical objects is illusory, meditation and purification of the body allowed the soul to transcend it.

Rituals were employed in Theurgy in much the same way that shamans seeking altered states of consciousness will use drums and chanting. The goal of Theurgy is to perfect the self by combining it with God or gods. Many modern Pagans use their rites to seek communion with the gods in a similar way. Some practitioners used talismans to focus their efforts and it is from these than many magical symbolic systems developed. While perfecting oneself is a noble goal in itself, there were practitioners who used it as a path to supernatural powers.

The first centuries of the Common Era were tumultuous ones both politically and spiritually. Philosophers began to speak ever more of one God yet mystery cults proliferated within the Roman Empire. People sought new ways to understand the universe. It is very easy to write history in such a way that with the advent of Christianity, monotheism was destined to dominate religion in the West. The history of the early Church however tells a different story.

Gnosticism was born amidst the strong debates about the nature of the Divine that Christianity stirred up. Gnosis is simply the Greek word for knowledge and the Gnostics believed that they were the ones who possessed the fundamental truths of creation. It was gnosis that was the path to salvation. While the Gnostics did believe in one highest god, they also believed in lower powers called Aeons. The material world that we live in was a creation of one of these Aeons and into the degenerate matter of the world sparks of the divine became entrapped. Humans are those fragments of divinity. Only through knowledge of reality can we reunite with god.

This pathway of knowledge to higher powers is the essence of Esotericism. Many modern Pagan theologies also operate on a belief in their deities being aspects of reflections of a single supreme god. By offering to teach worshippers a path out of the material world and into the sublime via the gods, modern Pagans are following in ancient pathways. Some Gnostic sects taught that Jesus was a saviour sent by the highest god to bring the light of knowledge and escape from the physical world to humans. This idea of a messiah is one that would be reasserted again and again in 20th century mystical thinking.

The fall of the Western Roman Empire left Europe as a complex network of religions. Paganism of various sorts existed alongside Christianity with much interchange between the two. Eventually Christianity became the dominant religion and much esoteric thought was lost or became mere folklore as orthodox teachings came to hold sway over the continent. Western Esotericism was eventually reborn from knowledge preserved in the East, particularly by Arab and Jewish scholars.

The doctrine of 'as above, so below' is used to describe the interconnectedness of all planes and states of existence

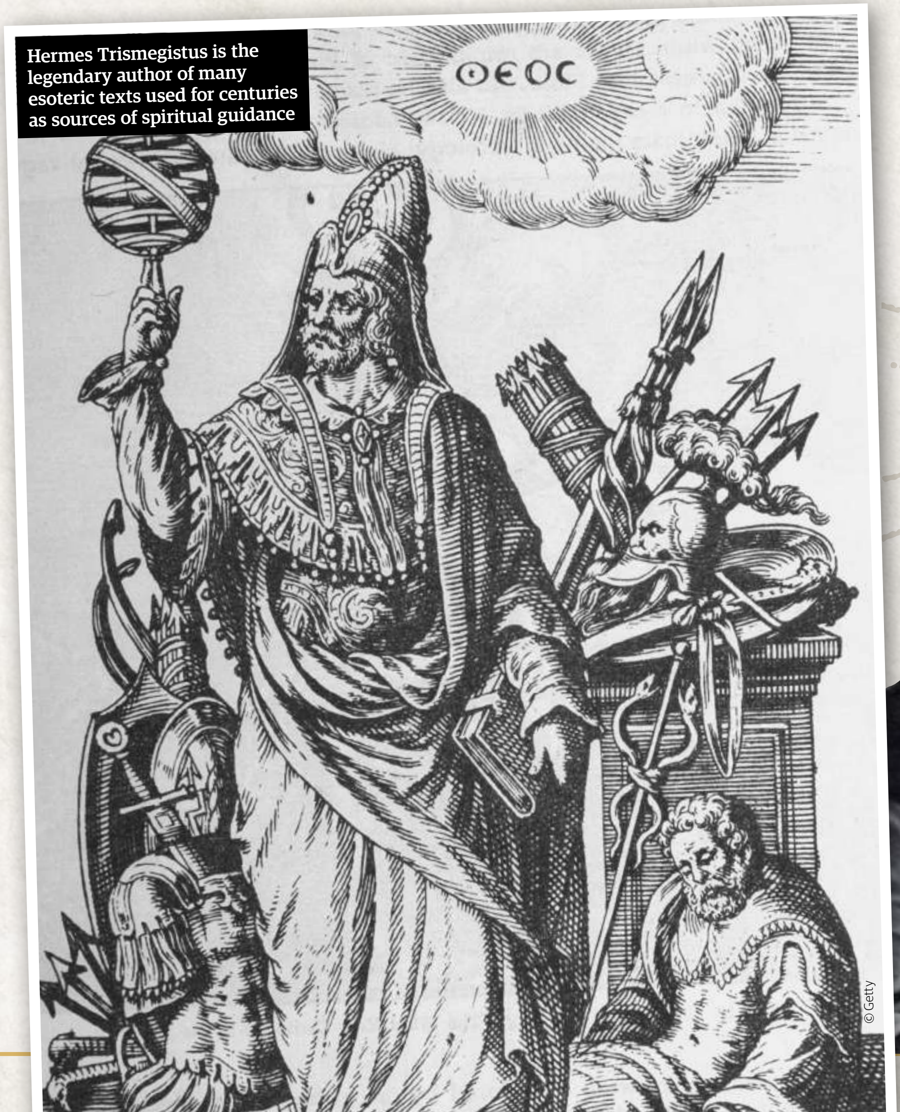
Kabbalah is a type of Jewish mysticism that had a great deal of influence and introduced a form of Esotericism palatable to a Christian view of nature. According to Jewish writings "Moses received the Torah from Sinai, and transmitted it to Joshua; and Joshua to the elders; and the elders to the prophets; and the prophets transmitted it to the men of the great assembly." In the original text the word 'received' is "Kibbel" from which Kabbalah received its name. The idea is that an unbroken line of transmission exists for teachings given directly to Moses from God. Kabbalah explained that there were levels of understanding in Biblical writings. These went from the literal meaning of a text, to the allegorical, to the teasing out of word meanings, to a secret and divinely inspired Kabbalistic subtext. There were those who used Kabbalah as a way of channelling God's power for their own purposes. The tale of the Golem, a clay figure brought to life by carving a sacred word on his forehead, expresses a sense of the Kabbalist's aims.

Searching for hidden meanings in arcane books would become an obsession for some Western Esotericists. Hermeticism took works attributed to Hermes Trismegistus (Hermes the Thrice-Greatest) and sought an ultimate truth concealed in his teachings. The figure of Hermes is clouded in a mysterious past. Previously people thought he was a contemporary of Moses who had predicted the coming of Christianity but now most scholars believe the collection of works that bear his name was created much later. He is mentioned by several writers of antiquity, with Saint Augustine being very sniffy about the magic in his works.

The works ascribed to Hermes are called the *Hermetica* and are mostly dialogues in which he instructs a student towards wisdom. The rediscovery of the Hermetic texts in the Renaissance gave a new birth to Hermeticism. Though the renewed study of Greek convinced some that the *Hermetica* was no older than the 2nd-3rd centuries CE, most remained convinced of the truths it offered to unlock. Thomas Browne wrote these newfangled scholars "shall never laugh me out of the philosophy of Hermes, that this visible world is but a portrait of the invisible."

One of the most important lessons for the Hermetics was that of 'As above, so below'. They thought that in the world there were images of the greater universe beyond our knowledge and our reason. It also taught that all things were connected. A change in our world would be echoed by a change in the higher realms. Pagans and witches have used this idea in creating tables of correspondence to guide their magical practices.

Those with the proper understanding would be able to find an object in this world that resonates with an aspect of the upper worlds. The use of idols in Pagan worship hints at the link between the physical and the spiritual world as



**Hermes Trismegistus is the legendary author of many esoteric texts used for centuries as sources of spiritual guidance**

© Getty

"Western Esotericism was eventually reborn"

© Creative Commons; Charlotte Wegner

**Madame Blavatsky was the driving force behind Theosophy and inspired many esoteric groups**

the image or statue connects to the divine. Other 'correspondences' – links between realities – used in magic could be a closely guarded secret.

Tied to the concept of correspondences is the theory of signatures. Since ancient times natural philosophers have been seeking treatments for diseases in nature. The theory of signatures posited that clues were planted in flora and fauna that hinted at their uses. If a plant looks like an eye, as the flower Eye Bright is supposed to, then a medicine made from it will be especially useful in healing eye conditions.

As Paracelsus described it "Nature marks each growth… according to its curative benefit". Pliny the Elder had used the most basic form of this sympathetic magic when he prescribed the lungs, livers, and kidneys of animals as useful in treating the human organs. Wise people sought out ever subtler and shrouded signatures left by providence. Those who worked too hard and got a headache would have taken walnuts to soothe their overworked brains.

There were those who were not satisfied with looking to nature for the things provided by the gods. The aims of alchemy were all to do with the perfection of reality. They wanted to transmute base elements into gold, free the human body from ageing and disease, and finally to stave off death forever. Even though these are worldly desires, within alchemy there was a strong desire to perfect the soul as well as the flesh. In mystical texts dating back to ancient Egypt and Greece, alchemists hunted for both the path to wealth and the path to wisdom simultaneously.

Alchemy made many notable scientific discoveries that paved the way for modern chemistry. Zinc was first distilled by an Indian alchemist. Phosphorus was isolated by an alchemist attempting to make the philosopher's stone from urine. Some of the greatest minds turned their efforts to alchemy. Sir Isaac Newton wrote voluminous notes during his alchemical researches. His discovery that all the colours of light could be freed from white light using a prism showed just how much there was hidden within nature. The notion of the concealed is one that has entered many Pagan systems of thought today where gods and powers may inhabit the world unseen by human eyes… at least, not those of the uninitiated.

Alchemy had both a profound impact on Western Esotericism and formed the foundation of modern-day chemistry

Historical progress from the Age of Enlightenment to the modern technological boom can appear like an unstoppable steam engine belching smoke as it thunders down a predetermined track. Rationality has won and superstition has been exposed as a ghost without a sheet. But humans are more than rational calculating machines. Just as saboteurs threw shoes into factory machines to protest the coming of industrialisation, others have bucked against the tyranny of logic and found ways to knowledge unavailable to the scientist.

Spiritualism emerged in 1848 in New York when two young girls, the Fox sisters, discovered that they were able to communicate with a ghost that haunted their home. Getting the spirit to rap on floors, they slowly teased out the story of its death. Soon the sisters became famous and people could be found around the world listening to tables being tapped by phantoms wanting to tell their stories.

Though the girls later admitted to perpetrating a hoax, Spiritualism was accepted by many as a way to breach the barrier between the living and the dead. Those able to act as conduits for conversation with spirits had access to knowledge that others could not compete with. Heaven became as easy to reach as if they had a telephone. In an age of common premature death, such contact must have been a comfort to the bereaved. Figures such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of the hyper-logical Sherlock Holmes, became a keen Spiritualist.

Spiritualism led to a renewed interest in fields of revealed wisdom that had been ignored for centuries. Individuals may have practised magic on their own, but now that people were again openly discussing things beyond the ken of scientists, like-minded seekers of truth began to come together.

Theosophy developed out of the work of Helena Blavatsky, who believed, as many esoteric thinkers do, that there was once a single world religion. Drawing much from Hindu and Buddhist beliefs, the Theosophists believed that a mystical saviour figure occasionally visited Earth to impart wisdom to humanity.

Blavatsky wrote in her book *The Secret Doctrine* that "Maitreya is the secret name of the Fifth Buddha, and the Kalki Avatar of the Brahmins – the last Messiah who will come at the culmination of the Great Cycle." This led to a boy called Jiddu

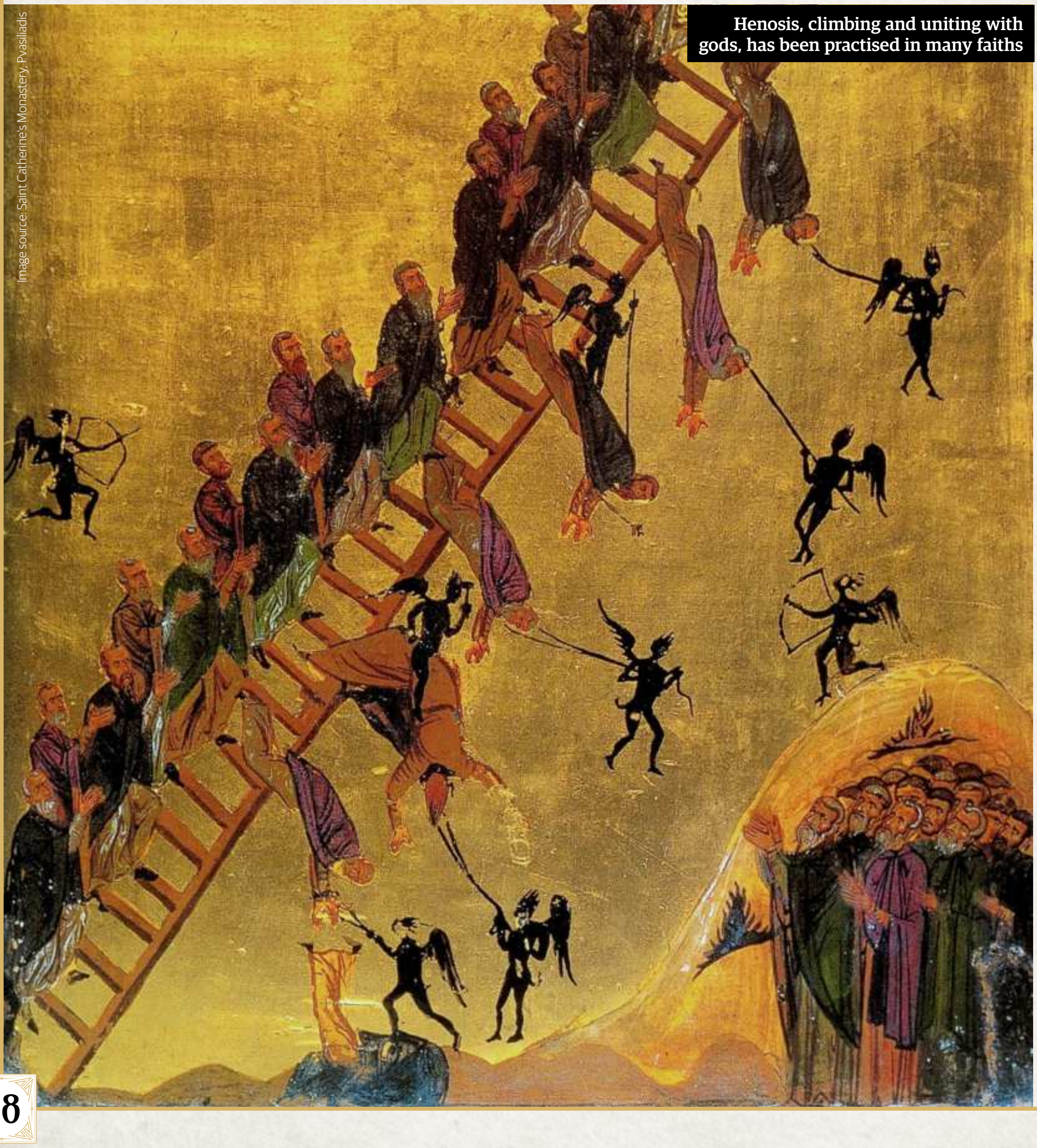
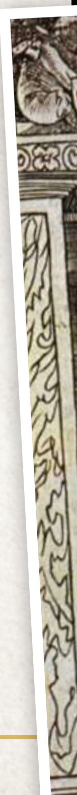

Henosis, climbing and uniting with gods, has been practised in many faiths

Image source: Saint Catherine's Monastery, Pvasiliadis



## “It is impossible to overestimate the effect Aleister Crowley has had”

Krishnamurti being identified as Maitreya and being groomed to take his place as the next great spiritual leader of mankind. Unfortunately for Theosophers, Krishnamurti later rejected their teachings and denied he was Maitreya.

Despite the failure of the Theosophical project Theosophy experienced some popularity in the early 20th century. Using psychic methods Theosophers searched for the *Akashic Records* – a spiritual text recording every human event, thought, and feeling that had ever or will ever occur. When Rudolf Steiner left Theosophy to found his Anthroposophy society, he took what he had learned from the etheric *Akashic Records*.

Image source: Marsyas

It is impossible to know what happened in the Eleusinian Mysteries, but here we see worshippers offering Demeter wheat

Other esoteric orders relied on more physical manifestations for their inspiration. The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was created around 60 pages of encoded writing known as the *Cipher Manuscripts*. These papers describe rituals and teachings to be imparted to initiates. The origins of these texts remains mysterious, though most researchers believe they were created by the founders of the Golden Dawn. The Golden Dawn eventually fell apart, riven from within by a series of internal squabbles (and a scandal or two), perhaps under the influence of “the wickedest man alive” Aleister Crowley.

Crowley later founded the religion of Thelema, merging it with O.T.O. - the Masonic-inspired Ordo Templi Orientis. The foundational text of the faith, *The Book of the Law*, was dictated to him by an astral, or spirit, being called Aiwass. Thelema teaches that every human has a Will that directs them towards what they should do, and that this individual Will is aligned to the Cosmic Will that orders the entire universe.

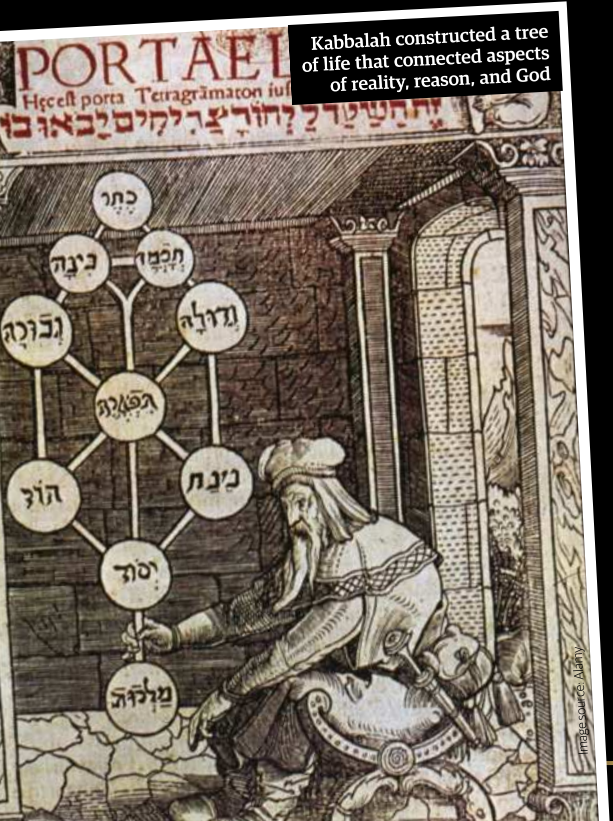
It is impossible to overestimate the effect Aleister Crowley has had on Western Esotericism and occult thought. Even though he revealed much, even this prolific writer held some things back for followers alone. “O.T.O. is in possession of one supreme secret. The whole of its system is directed towards communicating to its members, by progressively plain hints, this all-important instruction.” You cannot be esoteric if you let outsiders know everything.

Paganism today comes in many varieties; as many varieties as there are gods. Even defining Paganism can be difficult because it involves so much that is mysterious and ineffable. Personal relationships with deities, spirits, and the reality they represent are fundamental to modern Paganism, so in a sense all Paganism is esoteric as it gives access to hidden realms that those outside the faith can never enter.

Much of modern Paganism deals with looking backwards to more ancient times and the religions that our ancestors followed. This in itself is an ancient pursuit. Even the Greeks of classical Athens recognised the antiquity of Egyptian religion and wondered at the antediluvian secrets it may hold.

There is an urge in humans to find spiritual meaning and also an urge to form exclusive groups. Together these drives have spurred the creation of many a mysterious religious order that claims access to secret knowledge, knowledge to be revealed only those admitted to the group.

Those in search of esoteric wisdom will have to look beyond these pages. Most Pagans will tell you that what is worth learning cannot be taught. At least not by humans.



PORTAE L
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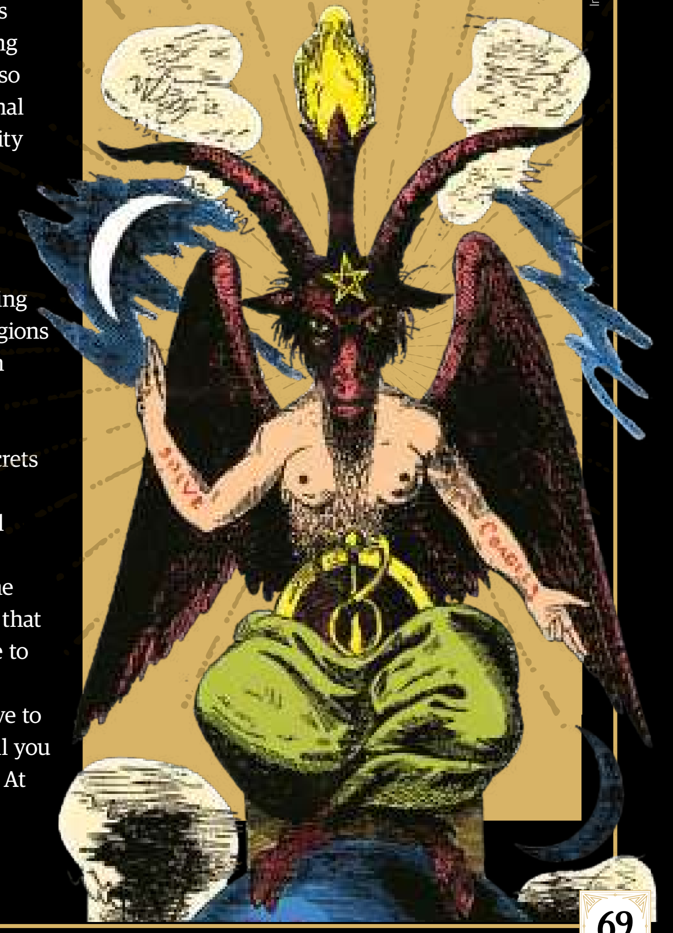
Kabbalah constructed a tree of life that connected aspects of reality, reason, and God

Image source: Alamy

## Éliphas Lévi: Father of Occultism

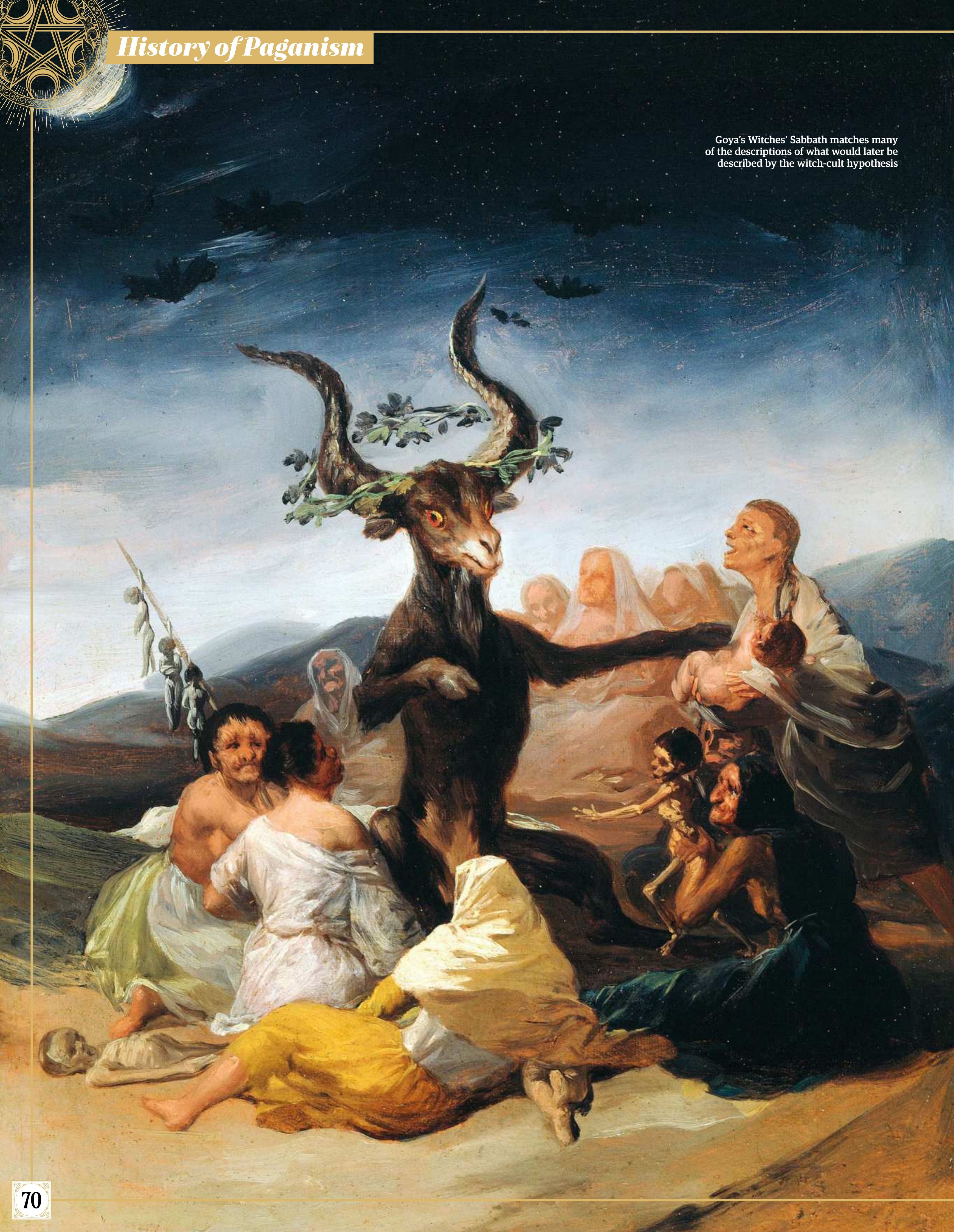
Éliphas Lévi is an unlikely figure in the history of Western Esotericism. Born Alphonse Louis Constant he was a fervent Catholic and Socialist of deep convictions. Despite never taking holy orders he used the title of Abbot and wore robes. When he published his *Testament of Liberty* he was arrested and sentenced to prison for its supposed call for insurrection. His disappointments as an author and political figure gave him time to further his studies of the esoteric arts.

In 1853, while Spiritualism was playing to eager audiences throughout the West, Constant changed his name to Éliphas Lévi and began publishing tracts on the history and practice of magic. His *Dogma and Ritual in High Magic* fed into the esoteric feelings of the time and led to new interest in previously ignored occult fields. Further books explored Kabbalistic readings of the universe, tarot cards, and the true nature of Jesus. Following his death his work fed into many esoteric societies who took up his research as soon as it was translated into English. Lévi may not have been too impressed by some of the things he inspired though ,as he said, “To practice magic is to be a quack; to know magic is to be a sage.”



Lévi was instrumental in bringing Baphomet back into popular consciousness

Image source: Art by Eliphas Levi. Color by David B. Pearson



Goya's Witches' Sabbath matches many of the descriptions of what would later be described by the witch-cult hypothesis

# The ancient witch religion

Before the coming of Christianity, was there a pagan religion that tied Europe together? And has it survived in an unbroken line to this day?

Written by Ben Gazur

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica*'s entry for witchcraft in the 1929 edition must have surprised many readers of the time. In it the author boldly asserts that,

*"When examining the records of the mediaeval [sic] witches, we are dealing with the remains of a pagan religion which survived, in England at least, till the 18th century."*

It goes on to describe how followers of this old religion can still be found in France and Italy. Despite the best efforts of the church this religion flourished for centuries. In fact, many priests "were only outwardly Christian and carried on the ancient rites." The encyclopedia termed this movement 'The Witch-cult'.

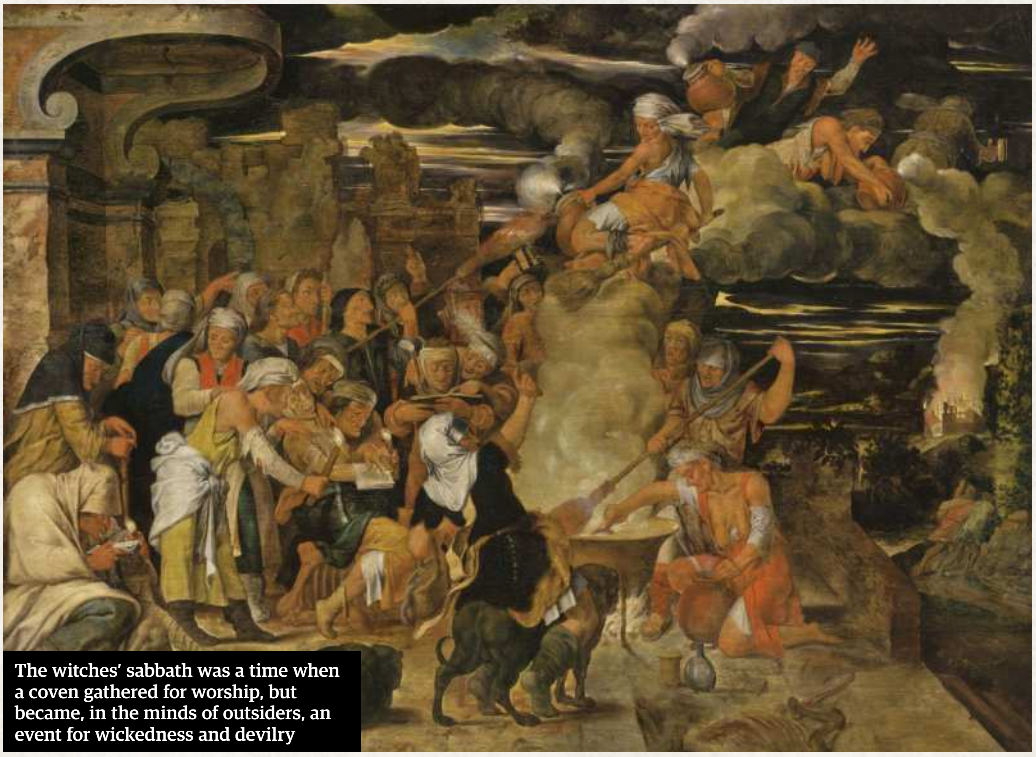
Through all editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* until the 1960s, this authoritative definition of witchcraft remained in place. It influenced not only the casual reader's view of the history of witchcraft but also played a role in shaping popular books and movies for a generation. Yet today most scholars reject the idea of a pan-European religion of witches.

What was this witch-cult that was apparently so widespread? To look into this we must explore the life and opinions of the author of the entry on witchcraft and the evidence they found for a pan-European pagan belief system.

The greatest proponent of the witch-cult hypothesis was the undoubtedly brilliant and redoubtable Margaret Murray, and it was she who wrote the above statements for the encyclopedia. Others like Karl Ernst Jarke in 1828 had proposed theories that witches were, in fact, followers of a pagan religion, but Murray was the first to fully explore the idea. In the course of her long life (her autobiography, published in 1963, was optimistically titled *My First Hundred Years)* she was an accomplished archaeologist, historian, folklorist, and Egyptologist. She became the first female archaeologist to teach at a British university, but her research could not be contained in any one area. Even as a child Murray had taken note of the rhymes and folklore told by the old people who lived nearby. Her interest in folklore became more focused when she spent time in Glastonbury and began to ponder the legends of the Holy Grail. She collected items related to witchcraft and even donated a bottle to the Ashmolean Museum that was said to contain a trapped witch inside it.

> Murray's witch bottle was recently displayed at the Ashmolean Museum's Spellbound exhibition about magic

In 1917 Murray presented a paper called 'Organisations of Witches in Great Britain.' This marked the beginning of the witch-cult hypothesis. As Murray remarked,



**The witches' sabbath was a time when a coven gathered for worship, but became, in the minds of outsiders, an event for wickedness and devilry**

until that point witch rituals and cults had not been subjected to scientific study. Over 31 pages of immaculately sourced research, Murray did exactly that. This paper was followedup by several books that further explored the witch-cult: *The Witch-cult in Western Europe*, *The God of the Witches*, and *The Divine King in England*. Her findings were startling to some, but utterly bewitching to others.

Murray's description of the witch-cult is vivid and fascinating. She never argues that magic is objectively real but instead studies the beliefs held by witches themselves, in just the same way an anthropologist may study the belief system of any other faith: as an example of belief, without questioning its reality, veracity, or lack thereof.

Murray believed that by studying ancient myths, legends, and historical records, a conserved set of rituals found in many countries and many times could be discerned. These existed as a religion followed by many people, but with the spread of Christianity, the older pagan ways had to be suppressed. At first it was only kings and lords who converted, leaving the majority of people still following the old faith. In many early texts produced by the church, references to devilry and magic can be found that show how they tried to eradicate the religion of the witches.

The significance of the number 13 to magical practitioners is highly influenced by Margaret Murray's theories about it

A 7th century Archbishop of Canterbury had to issue a decree against anyone who:

"...goes about as a stag or a bull; that is, making himself into a wild animal, and dressing in the skin of a herd animal, and putting on the heads of beasts; those who in such wise transform themselves into the appearance of a wild animal, penance for three years; because this is devilish."

From sources such as these Murray was able to reconstruct what she believed were the inner workings of the witch-cult. Each coven of exactly 13 members (a devil's dozen) was led by a master, often called 'the Devil' by Christian investigators. This person was considered a god incarnate by the witches and had to be obeyed in all things. He also had the task of instructing his witches in the performance of magic and rituals.

Murray was not concerned in her works with operative magic - casting spells and curses - she instead studied ritual magic; the beliefs and actions that underpinned the society of witches. It is this organisation of witches that was focused on the

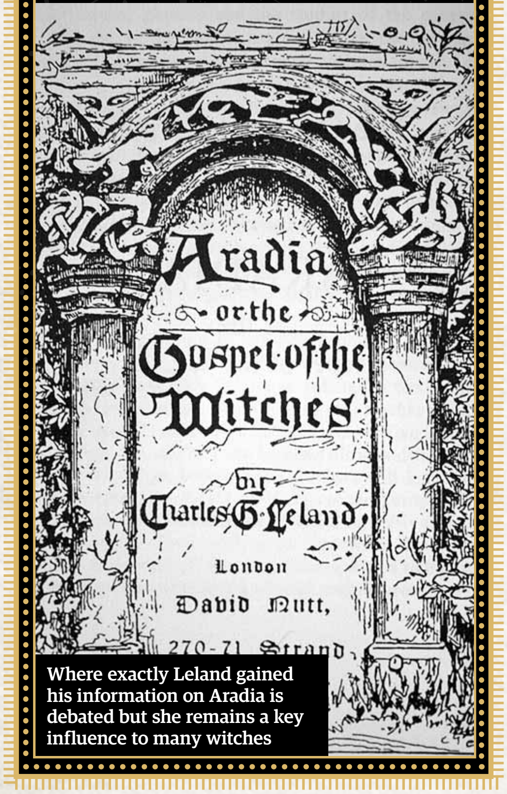
"Murray's description of the witch-cult is vivid and fascinating"

## Aradia, the witch messiah

Charles Leland was convinced that an ancient religion of witches existed. From this belief he concluded that there may well be a holy scripture used by them, and set out to find it. Published in 1899, *Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches*, is the result of his research.

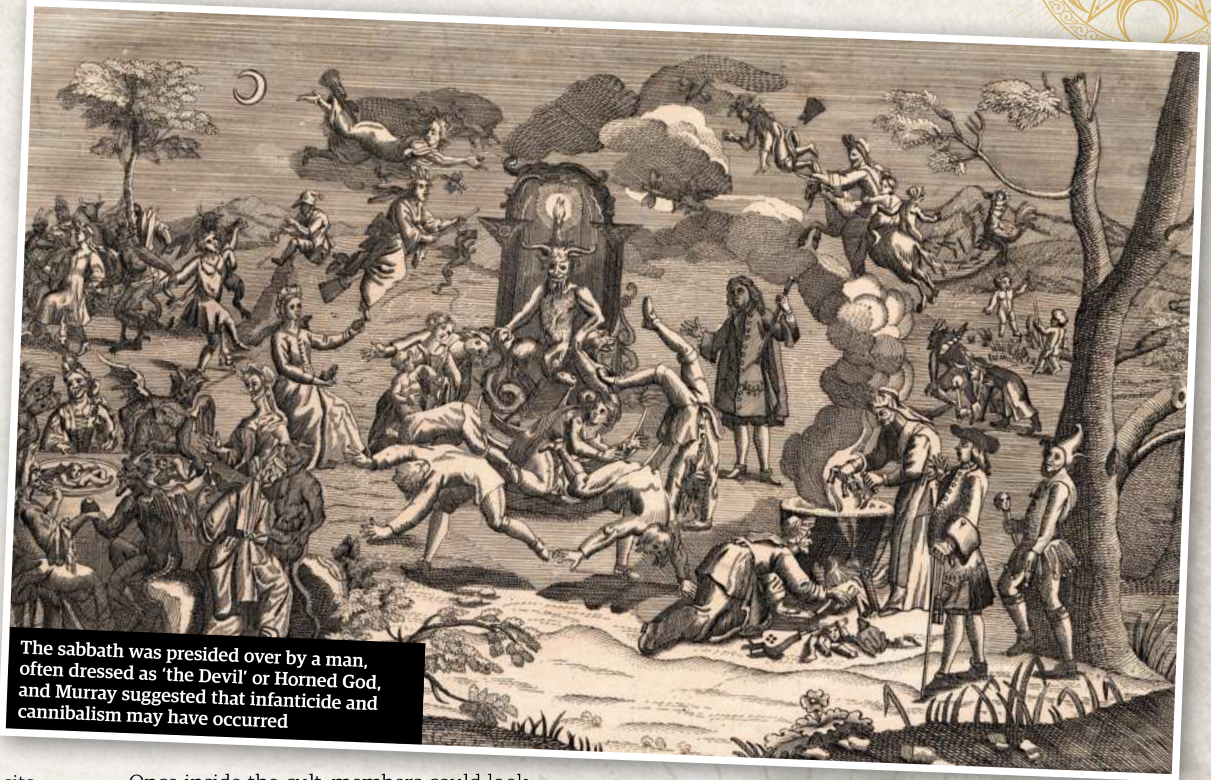
The prose and poems of the book describe how the goddess Diana was impregnated by her brother, the light-bringer Lucifer. When Diana gives birth to a girl she names her Aradia. Aradia is given the task of teaching witches how to protect the weak against the strong. Aradia then departs, but calls her witches to gather naked each Full Moon in the forest to celebrate with a consecrated meal called the Sabbat. Back in the heavens with her mother, Aradia can still be called on to use her powers.

The text of Leland's *Aradia* covers more of the legends associated with Diana but also describes practical magic. Should you want to have a good vintage of wine, it tells you how to pray to the goddess. If it is love you want, then there is a spell for that. Aradia is now a central figure in many Wiccan sects.



Aradia
or the
Gospel of the
Witches
by
Charles G. Leland
London
David Nutt,
270-71 Strand

**Where exactly Leland gained his information on Aradia is debated but she remains a key influence to many witches**



The sabbath was presided over by a man, often dressed as 'the Devil' or Horned God, and Murray suggested that infanticide and cannibalism may have occurred

Devil, as she called the head of a coven. Indeed the witches themselves in their testimonies at trials always claimed it was 'the Devil' they were meeting. He – Murray concludes the leader of a coven was almost always male – would conduct the religious services observed on the witches' sabbath and often led his colleagues in fertility dances. Sometimes he would appear to his followers either dressed in the form of an animal or be represented at a sabbath by a real animal. Sometimes the witches would know the true identity of their master, but sometimes it might be a mystery as to who was leading them.

The god worshipped by the witches was a matter of dispute. Sometimes it was a two-faced deity called Janus or Dianus, who was one of the earliest gods known to the Romans. Murray sometimes refers to the witch-cult as the Dianic cult in honour of their god. In later work Murray posits a Horned God, perhaps Pan or Cernunnos, at the centre of witch worship. All manner of horned creatures can be seen as its manifestations. The Minotaur, Herne the Hunter, and Naigamesha all show its hallmarks. Headdresses made from the skulls and antlers of deer have been found that are approximately 11,000 years old and may well represent objects used in religious rites. If outsiders glimpsed a man dressed as this Horned God it is easy to see how witches could have been interpreted as literal devil worshippers by them.

Murray theorised that folkloric traditions like Dorset's Horned Ooser were survivals from the witch-cult

The Devil who presided over the coven could be a harsh master. Absence from a sabbath could lead to a whipping or beating with an iron rod. Several witches' confessions refer to the Devil bearing this iron rod and using it when people tried to quit the cult. Those who attempted to reveal the secrets of the witches were put to death. As the Roman Catholic church would often call for the death of all witches, it is not hard to see why a witch-cult might want to remain a private and anonymous club.

Those who were born to members of the witch-cult were introduced to it at a very young age, as soon as they could talk. Those seeking to convert from Christianity were first forced to renounce their baptism. They then placed one hand on the head and one on the foot and swore that all that was between would be devoted to the god of the witches. People joining were often given a witches' mark somewhere to confirm their membership.

Once inside the cult, members could look forward to regular meetings with the Devil, which featured sermons and instruction. Cotton Mather, the Puritan American minister, said "The witches are organized like Congregational Churches." The similarity of the organisation of witches to a church was taken by Christians as a mockery of their own rites. As well as sabbaths, there were also four annual grand celebrations. These great feasts featured all-night dancing and feasting and certain other, unmentionable, obscene rites. Perhaps the most offensive charge hurled at the witches was that they sacrificed and consumed the flesh of babies.

In a 1918 paper Murray considered the evidence for child sacrifice. She found that babies, often unbaptised newborns, were sometimes taken by witches for special services. Here the babies would be killed, often by inserting a needle in the brain, and the flesh prepared for consumption. One way of ensuring witches never confessed was to feed them the tongue of a baby – this way the witch's own tongue would be as powerless as a baby's to reveal their secrets. Later, in *The God of the Witches*, Murray dialled back her discussions of child sacrifice and dark magic to make the witch-cult more

**Margaret Murray championed the idea of a long-lasting religion of the witches and made it one of the most popular theories about European witchcraft**

palatable. Adults could also serve as sacrifices. Murray thought that the traditional stories of selling one's soul to the devil could be derived from witches buying the right to live for pleasure for seven years, if they are willing to die when those seven years are up. In *The Divine King in England*, Murray traces sacrifices tied to the kings of Britain from William the Conqueror to James I. These deaths range from the mysterious shooting of William II with an arrow to the murder of Thomas Becket, possibly at the King's command. She claimed other famous people may have served as voluntary sacrifices to the witch-cult, including Joan of Arc and early serial killer Gilles de Rais.

Thus a whole religion can be traced from the horned figures painted on cave walls in the Neolithic age to the early modern world before Christianity finally triumphed and eradicated the witch-cult. Yet even then there were those who would not let it die.

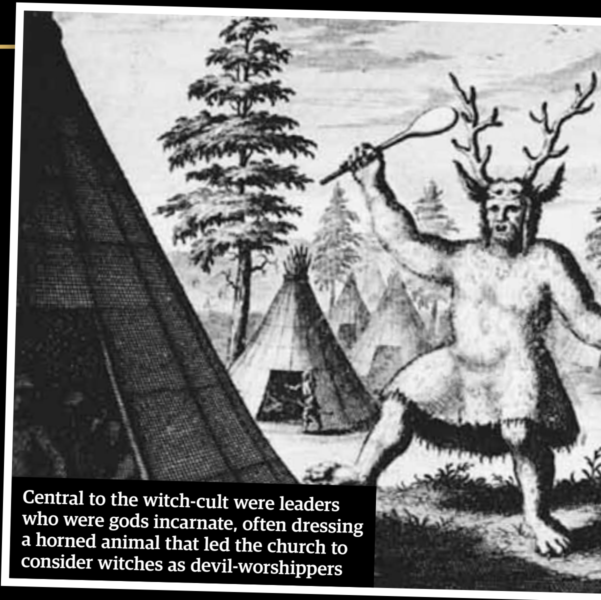
Margaret Murray's work was influenced by the anthropological studies of George Frazer as published in *The Golden Bough*. In that book Frazer compared religions and folklore from around the world in an attempt to find commonalities. He developed the theory that many myths in many places can be traced back to fertility rites and that many depended on the sacrifice (often symbolic) of a king or god who would later rise again.

Frazer took the title of his book from a painting by Turner, also called 'The Golden Bough', which showed a scene from the *Aeneid* where a golden branch is offered to Hades to allow Aeneas to pass into the underworld. Just as Aeneas would return from death, so too would the god of the fertility cults. He would die at the harvest, as crops do, but return to life in the spring, like a mythical vegetation god.

## The Horned God

According to the witch-cult hypothesis the central figure of veneration was a Horned God representing fertility. At meetings the leader of a coven would embody the god and even dress up as the deity. One of the reasons that Christians were so hostile to witch-cults was because the god of the witches so much resembled the Christian idea of the Devil.

Images of horned gods can be attested well into prehistory. In the Cave of the Trois-Freres in France around 13,000 BCE, someone sketched high on a wall the image of a man with an animal tail and the antlers of a deer. The discoverer of this picture called it 'The Sorcerer' and Margaret Murray thought it the earliest depiction of a deity on Earth. Today the Horned God is often called Cernunnos, after a Gallo-Roman sculpture from the 1st century CE was discovered with that name and the image of an antlered figure. In Wiccan belief, the Horned God can represent the masculine, but also animals and the vital forces of the wild. Some consider him the god who carries the souls of the dead to the afterlife. He is often paired with the Goddess as one of two chief gods.


Central to the witch-cult were leaders who were gods incarnate, often dressing a horned animal that led the church to consider witches as devil-worshippers

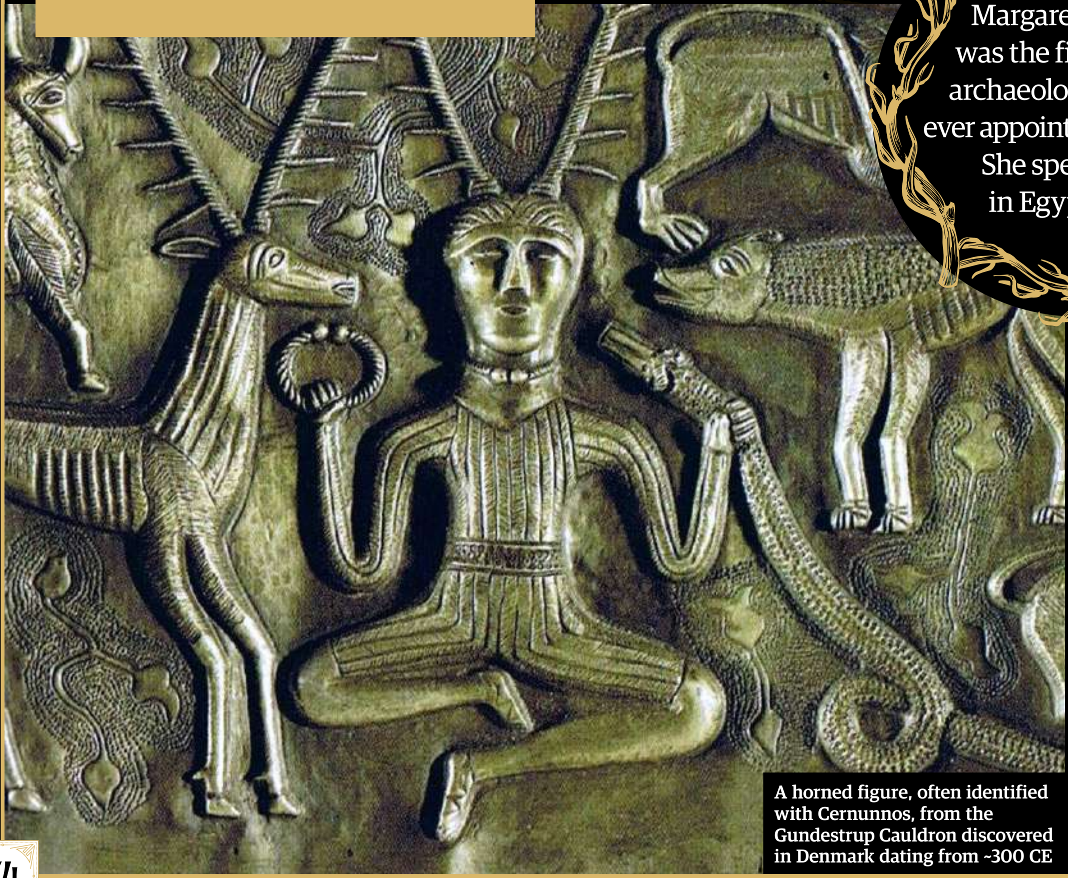
That Frazer found echoes of these fertility rites and beliefs in many cultures obviously strengthened Margaret Murray's thesis of a widespread witch-cult. Nor was the witch-cult hypothesis the first sympathetic reassessment of witchcraft. *La Sorcière* by Jules Michelet recast the victims of the witch trials as women rebelling against the brutalities of life under feudalism and the church. They were desperate people turning to sorcery in search of the wealth and power that was denied to them by their social betters. They were not themselves heirs to an ancient cult but they took inspiration from folklore and myth.

Charles Leland claimed to have discovered that societies of witches still existed and followed what he called the Old Religion. *Aradia*, published in 1899, is the result of his search for a 'gospel' of that faith. Many of the beliefs attested in it, such as witches' meetings called 'sabbats', would later be found in Margaret Murray's witch-cult hypothesis too.

Margaret Murray was the first female archaeology lecturer ever appointed in the UK. She specialised in Egyptology

The grounds for proposing a witch-cult had already been set out, but it was Murray's scholarship that gave it greater credence. As soon as it was published it met a very willing audience. Thanks to its success, Murray was given the job of producing the entry on witchcraft for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1929, introducing her witch-cult theory to even more people. It was an attractive theory to both sceptics who denied that witchcraft was real and to believers who saw magic as part of their heritage.

Among believers was the author Robert Graves. In his book *The White Goddess* he argued for the existence of mainly matriarchal societies in prehistory that worshipped a female deity. He gathered evidence from many cultures but insisted that the truth could only be viewed by those with a poetic mind. Indeed his whole work only makes sense if one uses poetic logic and accepts many 'if-then' arguments. Graves further publicised


A horned figure, often identified with Cernunnos, from the Gundestrup Cauldron discovered in Denmark dating from ~300 CE

his theory in his often-idiosyncratic retellings of the Greek myths and a novel, *Seven Days in New Crete*, which imagined a world where worship of the goddess was widespread. In his works he reconstructed a Celtic tree goddess called Druantia (derived from the Gaelic word for 'oak'; the word 'druid' shares the same root) who has since been adopted by Neopagans as a fertility deity.

Graves was not the only person influenced by the witch-cult hypothesis who has helped shape modern beliefs. Gerald Gardner was one of the most influential voices in modern Wicca. A keen follower of the witch-cult hypothesis, he thought the underlying religion had long ago died out, until he apparently discovered a surviving coven practising in southern England's New Forest. Using the knowledge he learned there, Gardner wrote many of the foundational texts of Wicca and helped to create several other covens. Gerald's influential book *Witchcraft Today* was published with an introduction by Margaret Murray.

Problems with the witch-cult and the other early studies of comparative anthropology soon emerged. Fieldwork and discussions with people living in the cultures Frazer had described showed he had often misunderstood their beliefs. As Margaret Murray said herself in the opening line of *The Witch-cult in Western Europe*, "The subject of Witches and Witchcraft has always suffered from the biased opinions of the commentators." Many felt that she fell into her own trap and that the evidence used by Murray and Frazer was cherry-picked to fit their pre-conceived notions of what they thought they would find.

Historians found Murray's reliance on the testimonies given at witch trials troubling. That most of these confessions would have been given under duress does not feature in Murray's analysis. For her the witches speak nothing but the truth. Modern research shows how close questioning of a subject can get them to confirm almost anything an interrogator suggests.

Many scholars today question the conclusions Murray drew from her extensive research. Some of her findings, such as that 'the Devil' always wore a hat, are superficial and silly-sounding today. But she also believed that legends of fairies may have been a reference to a diminutive race of humans who once shared the land with modern humans and who may have passed some of their religion to the witches. Archaeological searches have been unable to confirm their existence, but Murray's academic position at University College London gave her theory a patina of respectability.

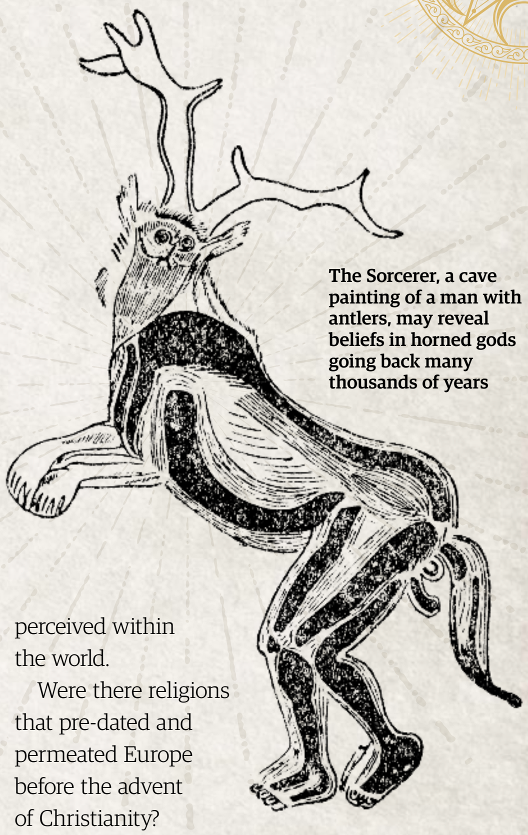
Some also find fault with Murray's affection for numerology. Any time the numbers 13 or seven could be found she took it as proof of the influence of the witch-cult. That the Order of the Garter originally had 26 members is evidence that King Edward III formed it on the basis of two covens (2 x 13). The opposite is also true in that sometimes the avoidance of the number 13 is held up as evidence of a conscious desire to rebel against the old religion. Of course, if you look closely at many numbers you will find them in some way derived from or related to 13 or seven.

Opinion is still split over Murray and her work, and later criticism often overshadows her initial academic reputation

Yet to attack the minutiae of the witch-cult hypothesis is perhaps to miss the important points raised by the theory and the longings that underpinned it. Murray was a supporter of women's suffrage who marched in several demonstrations. She may have been aware of the work of American suffragette Matilda Joslyn Gage, who thought of the persecution of the witches as nothing but an expression of the misogyny deeply entrenched in society. Others, female and male, would also find in the witch-cult ways to right the wrongs they perceived within the world.

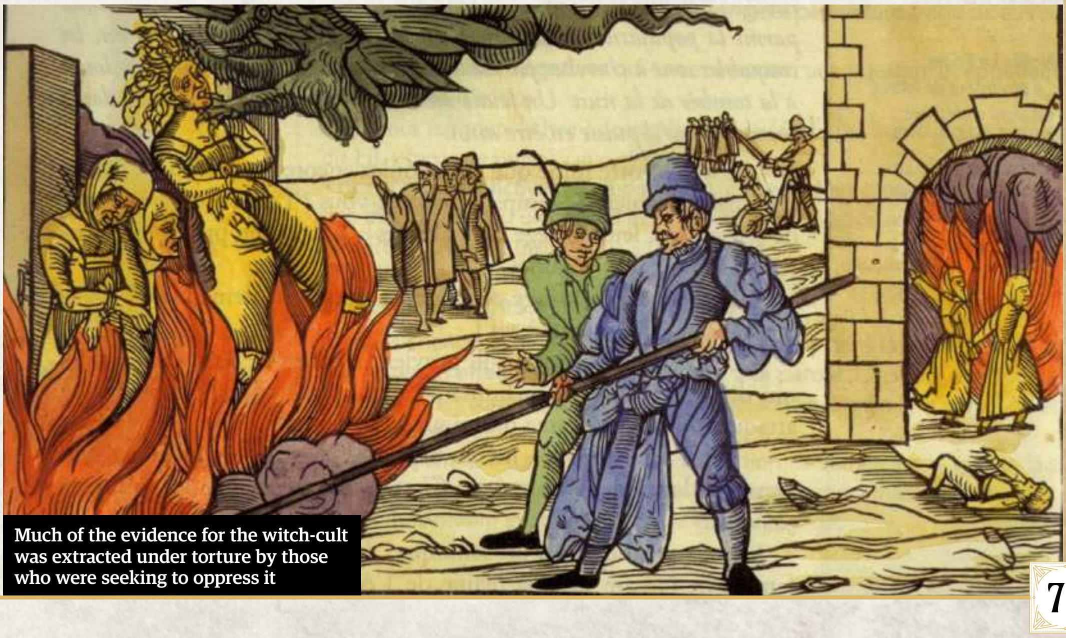
Were there religions that pre-dated and permeated Europe before the advent of Christianity? Undoubtedly there were. Can oral tradition preserve practices and traditions for centuries? We know this is true. Is it possible that a folk religion could have continued in some form? Absence of evidence is not always evidence of absence. All we can say for certain is that many today do still ascribe to the witch-cult hypothesis.

As the work of Murray and others has been incorporated into Wicca and other Neopagan belief systems, we can see how powerful the idea is. Many worship the Great Horned God and the Great Moon Goddess as described by the early followers of the witch-cult theory. Ask a Wiccan or other Pagan practitioner today and they are likely to tell you they feel a powerful connection to an ancient tradition. Whether this is the one suggested by Murray or the basic human need for belief may be up for debate, but the influence of the witch-cult hypothesis most certainly isn't.



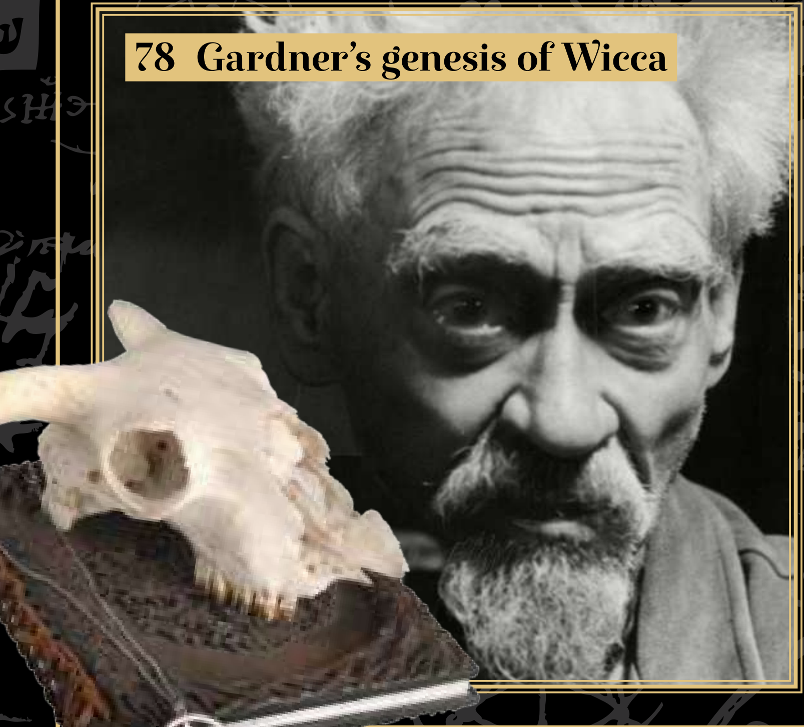
**The Sorcerer, a cave painting of a man with antlers, may reveal beliefs in horned gods going back many thousands of years**

© Alamy



**Much of the evidence for the witch-cult was extracted under torture by those who were seeking to oppress it**

# PAGANISM TODAY



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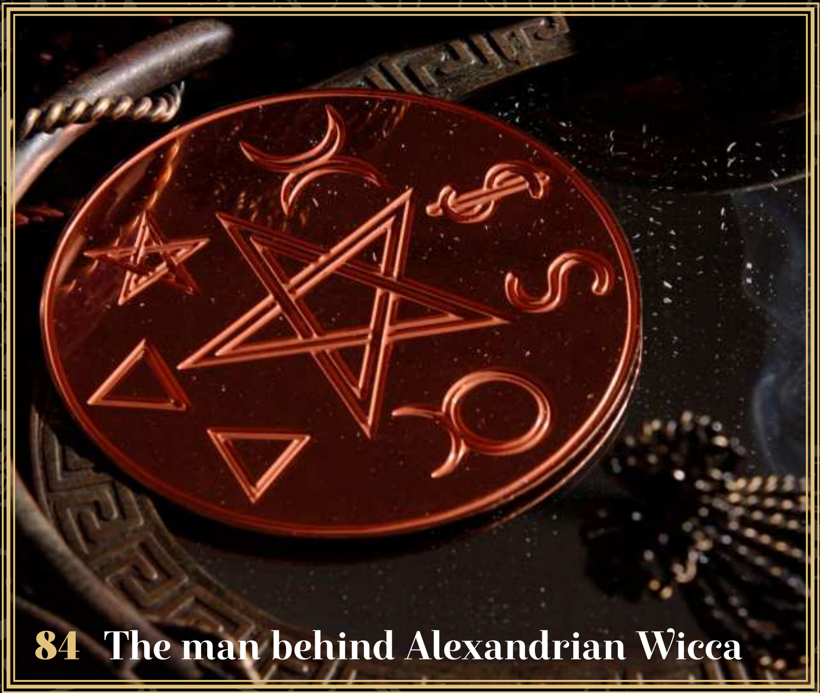

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# Gardner's genesis of Wicca

Utilising ancient and recent writings and commentary, Gerald Gardner brought Wicca into modern religious discourse during the mid-20th century and became its first media star

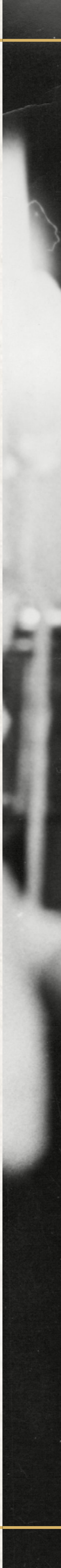
Written by Mike Haskew

Modern Wicca traces its origins to the early 20th century and the research and practice of individuals drawn to mysticism and occultism who sought a connection to the religions of the ancient world, particularly those of northern and western Europe.

While debate as to the religion's true origin continues, modern Wicca was popularised during the 1940s and 50s, particularly in the writings and teachings of Gerald Gardner, a former British civil servant and adventurer who travelled widely during his lifetime. He was drawn to the exploration of pagan religions of Asia and Africa as well as the ways of the druids and other practitioners. Wicca today includes followers who gather in covens, generally of up to 15 members, who practise witchcraft and the worship of nature. They revere a female deity, or Goddess, and other associated deities.

Wiccans generally see their religion as based in pre-Christian tradition, while it also includes elements of numerous ancient religions, drawn from many pre-existing traditions and interspersed with the esoteric writings of ancient and modern mystics. The religion includes ceremonial magic, tenets of Freemasonry, Spiritualism, Theosophy, and the religion of Thelema and its founder, the mystic Aleister Crowley. The foremost proponent of modern Wicca, indeed the "Father of Wicca", Gardner popularised the religion in the mid-20th century, particularly with the release of his *Book of Shadows*, a collection of the writings, spells and traditions of others brought together with some of Gardner's own thoughts and interpretations.

Gardner's journey through the world of mysticism was lifelong. Born in Blundellsands, Lancashire, England on 13 June 1884 to a wealthy family engaged in the timber trade, he grew up under the influence of his Irish nursemaid, Josephine 'Com' McCombie, and saw much more of her during his formative years than his own parents. He was a sickly boy, and his family financed moves with Com to the French Riviera, the Canary Islands, and the coast of Africa. Along the way, he developed a fascination with armaments that also lasted his entire life.



Gerald Gardner, the Father of Wicca, strikes a mysterious pose. Gardner popularised the religion during the 1940s and 50s

In 1907, Gardner joined the Legion of Frontiersmen, a home guard set to defend against a German invasion

The festival of Samhain, All Hallows' Eve, is celebrated in Glastonbury as Pagans gather to mark the night of the dead

Gardner spent nine years in Madeira, a Portuguese island colony, and rarely returned to England. Since he was abroad for much of his youth, Gardner never attended formal schools and essentially taught himself to read and write. After Com married David Elkington, owner of a tea plantation in Ceylon (Sri Lanka today), Gardner moved with the couple and learned the rudiments of running the enterprise. He became fascinated with the Buddhist beliefs of the local Singhalese people. Returning to England in 1907, he gravitated toward a family of relatives, the Sergenesons, who were interested in fantasy and mysticism. They often described experiences such as seeing fairies. Gardner claimed also that these family members introduced him to the story that his own grandfather was a practising witch. He often told a story that the family believed an ancestor had been burned at the stake as a witch in Newburgh in 1610.

Gardner returned to Ceylon late in 1907 to participate in the administration of a rubber plantation that his father had invested in. He became interested in Freemasonry and joined the lodge in the capital city of Colombo, but within four years the rubber enterprise had failed. His father sold the real estate, and Gardner wandered to Borneo. Considering himself an amateur anthropologist and archaeologist, he associated with the native Dusun and Dyak peoples on the Asian island. He was enthralled by their social customs, and particularly their religious practices, reportedly participating in native rituals. During this period he contracted malaria and moved on to Singapore.

While working on a rubber plantation, Gardner was befriended by an American Muslim named Cornwall, who introduced him to the tenets of that faith. While amassing real estate that totalled hundreds of acres, Gardner made the confession of the Islamic faith but never became a practising Muslim himself. Soon after the outbreak of World War I, he joined the Malay States Volunteer Rifles, but later concluded that he could help the war effort more significantly by returning to England. He arrived in 1916, attempted to enlist in the Royal Navy, but was denied due to health issues. He volunteered to work in a hospital outside Liverpool and experienced the horrors of combat-wounded soldiers while working as an orderly. A recurrence of his malaria prompted a return to Malaya that autumn, and he worked for the local government as an inspector of rubber commerce, probably amassing some wealth as he took bribes to ignore a brisk black market trade in opium.

For Gardner, a turning point in his life of occult enquiry occurred in 1927 as his father suffered from dementia, prompting a return to England. Visiting spiritual mediums and attending séances and other rituals, he believed that spirits of deceased family members were quite active. An encounter with

Gardner participated in archaeological digs in Egypt and became a fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute in the 1930s

## The Pagan Sabbats

Wiccans and other pagans celebrate eight major holidays, or Sabbats, during a calendar year. These holy days make up the wheel of the year and are based on ancient pagan holy days marking the Earth's movement around the Sun and the change of seasons. Some Wiccans celebrate only the four cross-quarter days, Imbolc, Beltane, Lughnasadh and Samhain, while others will celebrate all eight holy days, including Yule, Ostara, Midsummer and Mabon.

Imbolc, or St. Brigid's Day, the first holy day of the year, is observed on 1 and 2 February. Marking early spring, Imbolc recognises emergence from winter and lauds St. Brigid as a goddess. Ostara, the spring equinox, is observed around 21 March, commemorating the arrival of spring after the long winter. Beltane, also known as May Day, is celebrated on 1 May. Beltane is a celebration of fertility and procreation.

Midsummer is celebrated on 21 June, the summer solstice and longest day of the year. Wiccans observe the union of Heaven, Earth and Sun, while stressing healing magic and energy. Lughnasadh, also called Lammas, is celebrated on 1 August, marking the first of three harvest events. Mabon, the autumn equinox, is observed on 21 September, marking the second harvest festival as the season changes from summer to autumn.

Samhain, All Hallows' Eve, is celebrated on 31 October, marking the pagan new year, the night of the dead. Yule is celebrated between 20-22 December to mark the winter solstice, the longest night of the year. The observance symbolises the return of the Sun to rule the sky.

"Gardner believed that spirits of deceased family members were quite active"

Gerald Gardner once owned and operated the Museum of Witchcraft. Its successor is now located in Boscastle, Cornwall, UK

the spirit of a dead cousin profoundly affected his perspective on mysticism, and from that time he devoted much of his academic interests to the ideas of Spiritualism and an afterlife.

A whirlwind courtship and marriage took place that summer when he met Dorothea Frances 'Donna' Rosedale. He proposed the next day, and two weeks later, on 16 August, the couple married. Soon they returned to Malaya, and Gardner renewed his association with Freemasonry while working on archaeological digs and becoming more involved with folklore, mysticism and anthropology. During the 1930s he travelled further, spending time in Egypt, and in London he was introduced to the cult of the Mother Goddess. He lectured and wrote a book on weaponry and travelled throughout Asia, retiring to England at the insistence of his wife after his father's death in 1935.

Even after returning to Europe, the wanderlust continued, and Gardner travelled to the Middle East, becoming taken with the pagan goddess Ashtoreth and studying the deities of other ancient religions of the region, including Judaism. Plagued by chronic poor health, he was referred to a doctor who suggested that nudism might improve his physical fitness. As a member of a club in north London, he is thought to have met several influential people, one of whom introduced him to a contemporary pagan religion called Dionysianism. While traveling in the Mediterranean and living for months on the island of Cyprus, he wrote the novel *A Goddess Arrives*. After returning to England, he helped dig air raid trenches in London and volunteered as an air raid warden as World War II erupted in 1939.

> In a 1951 magazine interview, Gardner asserted, "Of course I'm a witch. And I get great fun out of it"

Relocating temporarily to Highcliffe to escape incessant German bombing of London, Gardner became involved with the Rosicrucian Order Crotona Fellowship, whose founder Alexander Sullivan claimed to be the reincarnation of numerous historical figures, including Pythagoras and Francis Bacon. While questioning many of the group's beliefs and practices, Gardner became particularly fond of several of its members. In September 1939 he was taken to an old house, required to remove his clothing, and guided through some sort of initiation ceremony during which he heard the word 'wica' and recognised it as Old English for 'witch'.

He later asserted that this group constituted the New Forest coven. He became interested in druidry, a religious movement that stresses harmony amongst all things in the natural world, and joined the Ancient Druid Order, a fraternal organisation that initiated its members. He frequented its ceremonies and rites such as its Midsummer ritual at the ancient Stonehenge site. At the same time, he joined the Folk-Lore Society and the Society for Psychical Research, while speaking on various topics.

In the spring of 1947, Gardner met Aleister Crowley, who had founded the religion of

## The Book Of Shadows

The 'Book of Shadows' is an ancient term that originally related to the body of spells, incantations and ritual information belonging to an individual witch. Upon that witch's death, their personal book was traditionally destroyed. However, Gerald Gardner, the father of modern Wicca, used the title as a vehicle for a collection of such spells and ritual material in combination with his own writings and observations when he published *Book of Shadows* during the late 1940s or early 1950s. Gardner promoted his *Book of Shadows* as containing early spells and incantations that were rooted in ancient texts. Further analysis revealed that much of its content was taken from the Renaissance grimoire text called the *Key of Solomon* along with other writings.

Doreen Valiente, the one-time high priestess of the Bricket Wood coven, later made extensive revisions to Gardner's *Book of Shadows* when serious questions as to its authorship and content emerged. Some observers have speculated that the concept of the *Book of Shadows*, as Gardner promoted it, was his own invention. Valiente said that the idea came to him after viewing a magazine ad in 1949, and she was among the first to question his assertions. He reportedly responded to her inquiry by saying, "Well, if you think you can do better, go ahead."

Gerald Gardner popularised modern Wicca with the publication of his *Book of Shadows* in the mid-20th century

Doreen Valiente became a close associate of Gerald Gardner and high priestess of the Bricket Wood coven

> One of Gardner's high priestesses initially sold many of his possessions to Ripley's Believe It or Not! after his death

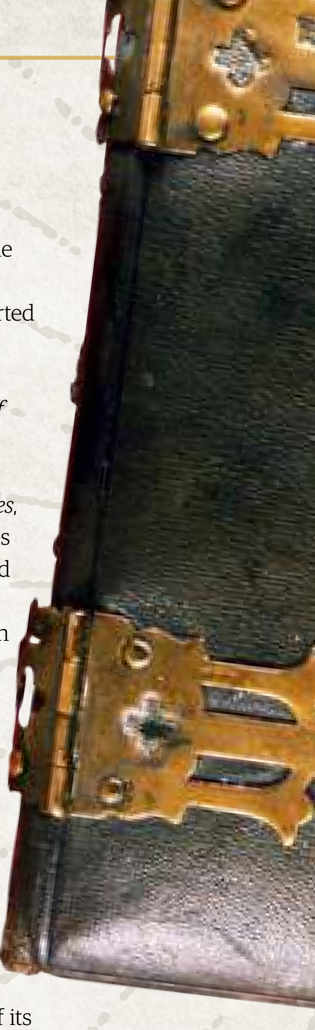
Thelema in 1904. Their association grew, and Gardner was elevated to high status in the Ordo Templi Orientis, a fraternal order in which Crowley was an influential member. Crowley died in 1947, and Gardner learned of this while travelling around the United States. For a while he led the Ordo Templi Orientis in Europe, but soon moved on to his most significant investment of time and effort.

Throughout his formative years, Gardner had become more familiar with contemporary pagan faiths, which were in a rudimentary form in the 1920s, borrowing both from ancient witchcraft and new ideas. He came to the conclusion that these were the surviving remnants of a witch cult that predated Christianity, as explained in the writings of author Margaret Murray. Gardner began to advocate the practice of paganism, including some of its rituals, in his fictional work *High Magic's Aid*, as he sought to revive the religion. He utilised the *Key of Solomon*, a Renaissance grimoire text, as a basis for much of his work, and began to put together his own volume of relevant information, known as *Ye Bok of Ye Art Magical*. Numerous Wiccan spells and incantations were written in the book, and Gardner later said that it was the basis for his *Book of Shadows*, a text that helped to popularise Wicca in the mid-20th century.

Gardner had travelled frequently to London and visited a nudist club called Spielplatz, and his interest in druidry had increased. He purchased land near the town of Bricket Wood and became active in another nudist enclave nearby. He later purchased an old building, deemed a 'witch's cabin', from a friend and brought it to Bricket Wood, where he held a sort of pagan ritual possibly based on ceremonial magic, founding the Bricket Wood coven during the 1940s. Its first members came from the nearby nudist colony.

Although the phrase 'Book of Shadows' has long been descriptive of a witch's personal volume that contains their own spells and rituals, Gardner explained that his book contained ancient information given to him as a member of the New Forest coven along with some of his own observations and contributions. While he asserted that much of the book was rooted in ancient witchcraft, a great portion of the *Book of Shadows* is believed to have originated with the *Key of Solomon*, the *Gospel of Witches*, which was written by Charles Godfrey Leland and belonged to an Italian coven, the writings of Crowley, and even poet Rudyard Kipling.

While observing the Midsummer ritual in 1953, Gardner initiated Doreen Valiente into Wicca, and she later became high priestess of the Bricket Wood coven. She assisted Gardner in the preparation of the *Book of Shadows* for publication and later made significant alterations to it after much of its content was deemed to have been lifted from other works. Nevertheless, Gardner had asserted that earlier witches had refrained from recording their rituals and incantations for fear of persecution. Later, however, as they began to do so, the *Book of Shadows* had become a significant text, raising the profile of Wicca in popular culture and subsequently attracting a growing number of followers during the 1950s and 60s.



## Defining moment

### The family practitioners

### Early 1907

Although his Anglican family has had little to do with their relatives, the Sergenesons, because the latter are Methodists, Gerald becomes enamoured with them as they are willing to discuss the paranormal with him and relate tales of such occurrences in their lives. From the Sergenesons, Gardner learns an old story that his grandfather had actually been a witch, and hears that one of his ancestors had been tried and found guilty of witchcraft in the early 1600s. That relative was burned for the crime. The time Gardner spends with these relatives fuels a growing interest in the occult, leading to further discoveries.

## Timeline

1884

**Gardner is born**
On this date, Friday the 13th, Gerald Gardner is born into a wealthy family in Blundellsands, Lancashire, England. His father, William, and mother, Maria, have five sons and three daughters.
**13 June 1884**

1888

**Travels abroad begin**
Gerald's ill health at age four prompts his nursemaid, Josephine 'Com' McCombie, to offer to take the boy abroad. Travels to France, the Canary Islands, the African coast and Madeira follow.
**Summer 1888**

1923

**A government employee**
Gardner accepts a position in the Office of Customs in Malaya, travelling extensively as an inspector of the rubber industry. He becomes responsible for overseeing opium commerce and probably accepts bribes.
**September 1923**

1927

**Meeting a mystic**
After travelling to Britain to visit his sick father, Gardner begins evaluating mysticism and experiences contact with dead relatives. One mystic apparently summons a deceased cousin, leaving a lasting impression on Gardner.
**28 July 1927**

1927

**A whirlwind courtship**
Gardner marries Dorothea Frances Rosedale, known as Donna. The two have met only days earlier, coincidentally on the same evening that Gardner met the medium who conjured up his late cousin.
**16 August 1927**

1936

**Retirement and return to Britain**
Gardner retires from the civil service, intending to remain in Malaya; however, Donna insists that they return to Britain, facilitating further adventures in the occult and Gardner's foray into Wicca.
**January 1936**

1937

**A doctoral degree**
Perhaps compensating for his lack of formal education, Gardner purchases a doctoral degree of dubious academic value. He begins using the title 'Dr.' and makes further unsubstantiated academic claims in 1951.
**September 1937**

# Gardner's genesis of Wicca

This elaborately adorned and bound witch's personal *Book of Shadows* resides in an individual's collection

This Wiccan altar includes such items as a cauldron emblazoned with a pentagram along with a ceremonial chalice

At this house in Highcliffe, Gerald Gardner is said to have been initiated into the New Forest coven

Through the blend of ancient, contemporary and personal writings, tenets and perspectives, Gardner developed the modern Wicca religion and became known as its father. After the British government repealed its long-standing Witchcraft Laws in 1951, Gardner published *Witchcraft Today*, another popular text, three years later, and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* in 1959.

Along with his close circle of friends, particularly Valiente, he led the transformation of modern witchcraft into the Wicca movement. Capitalising on the turbulent times, the principles of Wicca - including a break from traditional religion, growing interest in occultism and spirituality, and an emphasis on unconventional lifestyles and harmony with nature - grew in popularity in Britain, the United States, Continental Europe and Australia.

Gardner promoted Wicca at every opportunity, even inviting the media to write articles on the topic in the belief that publicity was the only way for the faith to grow. While some of the resulting public scrutiny was unfavourable, interest continued to expand. One of the most difficult aspects of Wicca emanates from its mystic, secretive nature. Throughout Western history, 'witches' were incorrectly associated with Satanism, and Wiccans still struggle to get those unfamiliar with it to differentiate it from devil worship.

During his last years, Gardner continued to guide the Bricket Wood coven. He brought several high priestesses into the Wicca fold, including Valiente, Lois Bourne, Patricia Crowther and Eleanor Bone. He became a principal in the Museum of Magic and Witchcraft, then located on the Isle of Man, and associated with others who helped popularise Wicca, including author Robert Graves, whose book *The White Goddess* became a prominent vehicle for the rising popularity of the religion.

Gardner died in 1964 at the age of 79. As so often in his life, he was travelling at the time. Intending to visit Lebanon, he collapsed with a massive heart attack at the breakfast table one morning aboard ship. He was buried in Tunisia with little fanfare - but not before he had become the catalyst for a religious movement that counted more than 50,000 members in Western Europe and the United States by the early 1980s.

## Defining moment

### Inspired by the theatre

### August 1939

While residing in Highcliffe, Hampshire, the Gardners attend a play about the life of Pythagoras in a small theatre associated with the Rosicrucian Order Crotona Fellowship. Although Donna dislikes the production, Gerald is inquisitive and begins attending local meetings of the mystic group. He soon becomes critical of many of its beliefs, particularly the claims made by its founder, Alexander Sullivan, that he is the reincarnation of several famous individuals. When a group leader declares that Britain will not become involved in World War II and the country declares war on Nazi Germany the following day, Gardner discounts the organisation's veracity.

## Defining moment

### Questions and comments

### Summer 1953

Gerald
Brosseau
Gardner
1884-1964
Father of Modern
Witchcraft
Lived Here
1938-1945

Doreen Valiente reviews the *Book of Shadows* and questions Gardner's source material, particularly noting that some passages are similar to the writings of well-known occultist Aleister Crowley, while others may have been taken from the *Key of Solomon* - a text thought to have originated during the Renaissance - and other works rather than ancient sources as Gardner had represented. He reportedly admits that he has appropriated these materials to supplement his own writings and other available information included in the book. Valiente undertakes a substantial revision of the text, destined to become popular during the surge of interest in modern Wicca.

1939

- **Initiation into New Forest coven**
  Gardner is friendly with several Rosicrucian members, particularly Edith Woodford-Grimes, or 'Dafo'. They take him to a house owned by Dorothy Clutterbuck, 'Old Dorothy', where he is initiated into the New Forest coven.
  **September 1939**

1947

- **The Bricket Wood coven**
  Buying land at Bricket Wood near Hertfordshire, Gardner also purchases an old 'witch's cottage', and reassembles it there. During Midsummer, he hosts a ceremony and becomes founder of the Bricket Wood coven.
  **21 June 1947**

1951

- **Repeal of the Witchcraft Act**
  The British government repeals the Witchcraft Act of 1735, prompting Gardner to begin publishing his writings. The *Book of Shadows* becomes a prominent text during the growth of modern Wicca.
  **22 June 1951**

1953

- **Initiation of Doreen Valiente**
  After corresponding with Gardner since the prior year, Doreen Valiente requests initiation into the Bricket Wood coven during Midsummer observances. Although he hesitates at first, Gardner agrees. Doreen soon becomes high priestess.
  **21 June 1953**

1964

- **Death of Gardner**
  While travelling to Lebanon, Gardner dies aboard ship and is buried in Tunisia. Years later his grave is relocated and a plaque attached to it that reads, 'Father of Modern Wicca. Beloved of the Great Goddess.'
  **12 February 1964**

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The REAL WITCHES CRAFT

Alex Sanders (born Orrell Alexander Carter) took Britain's witchcraft world by storm through the creation of Alexandrian Wicca and a string of scandals

Wiccan Spirituality
PAGAN Every Day

Many members of the witchcraft community write books on the subject in an attempt to help the public understand it

# The man behind Alexandrian Wicca

How one man created his own brand of witchcraft, and in doing so created a phenomenon that is still rocking the Wiccan community today

Written by Poppy-Jay Palmer

After his unconventional upbringing, it's no surprise that Orrell Alexander Carter, later known as Alex Sanders, went on to establish Alexandrian Wicca, a brand of witchcraft that took Britain by storm.

Raised in an English working-class family, his mother and grandmother introduced him to esoteric ideas from a young age, which lead him to a career as a medium in his local Spiritualist churches, as well as the study and practice of ceremonial magic. Since Sanders' initiation into witchcraft there have been many contradictory accounts as to how it happened. Even Sanders' version is inconsistent. But his most famous account, as given in his biography, *King Of The Witches* by June Johns, goes as follows: "One evening in 1933, when I was seven, I was sent round to my grandmother's house for tea."

"For some reason I didn't knock at the door as I went in, and was confronted by my grandmother, naked, with her grey hair hanging down her waist, standing in a circle drawn on the kitchen floor." According to Sanders, his grandmother told him to step into the circle, take off his clothes and put his head between his thighs. Nicking his genitals with a sickle-knife, she said, "You are one of us now."

However, it has since been revealed that the scrotum-nicking part of the story wasn't actually true, and was instead fabricated for publicity. Once he became famous, Sanders gained a reputation for exaggerating and making things up about his early life.

For a few years after working as a medium, Sanders went on to have a somewhat normal life. He got a job in a manufacturing chemist's laboratory in Manchester, and even married and had two children. But he still harboured a deep interest in the supernatural. His first wife, Doreen Stretton, didn't approve. The marriage eventually failed when Sanders wanted more children and Stretton didn't. According to his second wife Maxine, a fellow Wiccan, Sanders was grief-stricken, and cursed Stretton with fertility. She remarried and had three sets of twins.

Following his divorce and loss of custody over his children, Sanders became isolated, and decided to live life on the 'left-hand path'. According to Sanders, he began to dabble in black magic in an attempt to gain money and sexual success. Soon after, he was taken in by an extremely wealthy middle-aged couple that claimed he was the double of their late son. They fed and clothed him, and treated him as one of the family. He threw great parties and became sexually promiscuous, and had everything he wanted. However, the black magic eventually turned sour: one of Sanders' favourite mistresses committed suicide, and his sister was injured in a shooting accident and diagnosed with terminal cancer shortly afterwards. The turn of events led to an epiphany, and it was then that Sanders decided to stop using magic for selfish reasons and to teach it to others instead.

But his bad luck continued: in 1963, Sanders started studying the works of Egyptian mage Abramelin, with more unfortunate consequences. He claimed angels told him to seek work as a book-duster and odd-job man at John Rylands Library in Manchester to gain access to an original copy of the *Key of Solomon*. However, an allegation that he had defecated in the library's basement led to the discovery that he had also been ripping out the pages of his coveted book and taking them home. As a result, he was almost prosecuted until it was agreed that he would return the materials and be dismissed from the library without being charged.

Sanders claimed descent from 14th century Welsh prince Owain Glyndŵr, portrayed as a magician by Shakespeare

Sanders finally embraced Wicca in the early 1960s following correspondence and meetings with Sheffield occultist Patricia Crowther. He convinced the *Manchester Evening News* to run a front-page article on the subject, and both lost his job and grew estranged from the Crowther family, who refused to initiate him, as a result. He eventually found someone else to initiate him into a different coven. Over the years, many initiates came and went, but Sanders remained and worked his way up to High Priest status. Shortly afterwards, Sanders met his second

> "Sanders became isolated, and decided to live life on the 'left-hand path'"

Wicca has greatly developed since its conception, with neopaganism taking on historical beliefs of the past, but adding a new spin

Alex Sanders quickly rose through the ranks of Wicca and ended up becoming a High Priest and starting his own covens

wife Maxine, who he made his High Priestess. The pair married, moved to London and continued running their coven and teaching witchcraft classes from their basement flat. By 1965, Sanders had developed his own brand of witchcraft, known as Alexandrian Wicca, claimed over 1,500 initiates in 100 covens, and declared himself 'King of the Witches'.

Like other traditional witchcraft systems, Alexandrian Wicca believes that only a witch can make another witch through an initiation. As with Gardnerian Wicca, the initiation for Alexandrian Wicca consists of three levels, often referred to as the 'first', 'second' and 'third' degree, with only second and third degree witches being able to initiate new witches, and only thirds being able to initiate others to third degree (also known as a 'High Priestess' or 'High Priest'). Some Alexandrians have added a preliminary rank called 'neophyte' or 'dedicant' since the level system's conception so potential witches can get a taste before committing. Neophytes are not bound by oath, but are also not considered to have officially joined the tradition, and are therefore not able to experience certain aspects of its oath-bound rituals. When put side by side with Gardnerian Wicca, Alexandrian is more eclectic, with Maxine Sanders noting that Alexandrians take the attitude of 'if it works, use it'.

Following a newspaper article published about him in 1969, Sanders shot to fame both inside and out of the Wicca community. His goings-on inspired June Johns' romanticised biography and the 1970 film *Legend Of The Witches*, and led to television appearances and public speaking events. However, he was often criticised by other witches who believed that he was exploiting the Craft, even though Maxine Sanders often insisted that he was merely trying to divert attention away from other witches. One such publicity stunt involved Sanders promising reporters that he could bring a corpse back to life when the media started to get curious about the activities of the couple that ran Sanders' coven. Putting on a show, Sanders had an associate pose as a doctor to verify that the 'corpse' was dead before he commenced reading an 'ancient' invocation that was actually a Swiss roll recipe read backwards, which caused the 'corpse' to come to life. Unbelievably, the reporters bought it.

Despite the scandals, Sanders was also famous for pulling off a number of magical feats. He was alleged to have created a 'spiritual baby' called Michael, whose birth was believed to be a result of a sacred act of masturbation that occurred between Sanders and a male assistant (Sanders claimed that Michael disappeared to grow up, but later returned in spirit to forcibly make Sanders party hard, insult people and act odiously).

Sanders' other alleged magical feats included the following: curing a heroin addict, curing a woman's cystitis by willing it away, curing a woman of cancer by sitting at her hospital bed for three days while pouring healing energy into her via her feet, ending multiple pregnancies, and getting rid of warts by wishing them on others. Sanders' most famous feat, however, involved his own daughter, Janice: she was born in dry labour, with one foot twisted backwards. After being told there was nothing to be done, Sanders anointed the foot with olive oil and set it straight. Janice was cured, and only walked with a limp during bad weather.

In 1979, Sanders announced that he wished to make amends for hurting the witchcraft community in the past, and insisted that witches should put aside their differences to unite and become respected. Turning over a new leaf, he partnered with psychic and trance medium Derek Taylor, and developed the magical work of his Order, the Order Della Luna in Constantinople. The pair reportedly worked with spirits, celestial intelligences and the demiurge, writing journals of channelled notes, and even caught a warning of World War III. Away from Taylor, Sanders also operated London-based group the Order of Deucalion, which focused on Atlantean magical research.

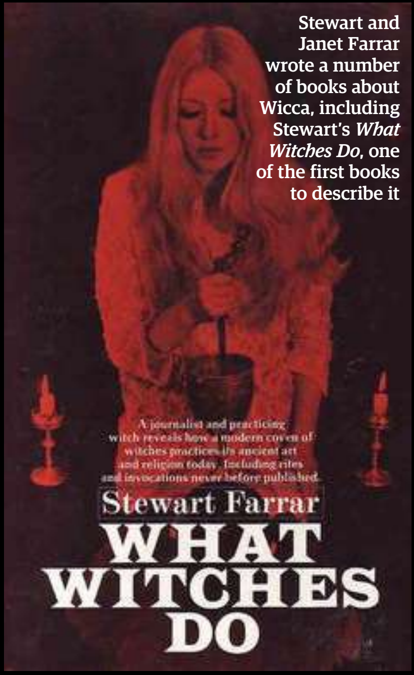
Sanders died of lung cancer in 1988, aged 61, but his brand of witchcraft lived on. Alexandrian Wicca has slowly become one of the religion's most widely recognised traditions, and is practiced in Canada, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Australia, Brazil, the United States and South Africa, as well as in Britain.

## Meet the Farrars

Like Alex and Maxine Sanders, Stewart and Janet Farrar were another influential couple in the Wiccan world during the 20th century. After being initiated into Alexandrian Wicca separately by Alex and Maxine Sanders in 1970, the pair met, married and became co-authors, collaborating on books like A Witches' Bible: Volume I & II (1981), The Witches' Way (1984) and Spells And How They Work (1990), among others. Stewart also wrote a number of books independently, including 1971's pivotal What Witches Do, one of the first books to describe the then-new religion.

Alexandrian Wicca's name was actually chosen when Stewart once asked Sanders what witches who were initiated into Wicca via their covens should be called. After discussing the matter, he came up with the term 'Alexandrian'. Before that time, Alex and Maxine Sanders were both happy being referred to as witches, but the new name stuck. Stewart quickly rose through the ranks to High Priest, and founded a new coven in south London with Janet as his High Priestess. From there, the coven grew and multiplied.

The Farrars later became interested in neopaganism, a modern religious movement influenced by historical pagan beliefs. Stewart died in 2000, but Janet continued writing and became a frequent guest lecturer on the subjects of Wicca and neopaganism. She is now married to neopagan author Gavin Bone.


A journalist and practicing witch reveals how a modern coven of witches practices its ancient art and religion today. Including rites and invocations never before published.
Stewart Farrar
WHAT WITCHES DO

Stewart and Janet Farrar wrote a number of books about Wicca, including Stewart's *What Witches Do*, one of the first books to describe it

© Alamy, Getty Images

# Stregheria

Many call the Stregheria tradition La Vecchia Religione, or 'the Old Religion'. Yet is this strand of witchcraft as ancient as many believe?

Written by Dee Dee Chainey

The first to label Italian witchcraft as a pagan religion were Leo Martello and Lori Bruno, and the path saw a resurgence in the 1980s with the work of Raven Grimassi, an American Wiccan priest and author, who died in March 2019. Grimassi, as the son of an Italian mother, claimed that Stregheria was a hereditary tradition, stemming from ancient Etruscan beliefs from the Tuscany region. He faced enormous criticism for these claims from his contemporaries, yet even his critics have admitted that he never claimed to be reproducing the rites and beliefs of original Italian settlers in North America, but that his practice reworked elements into a new Italian-American path, albeit incorporating certain principles of Wicca. Many practices align with contemporary Neopaganism: the pentagram is used, rituals can take place inside a circle, similar ritual tools are used on the altar, and many practitioners observe the eight festivals of the Wheel of the Year, here called 'Treguendas'. Practitioners observe monthly full moon rituals, and working sky-clad (naked) is encouraged. Specific deities revered include

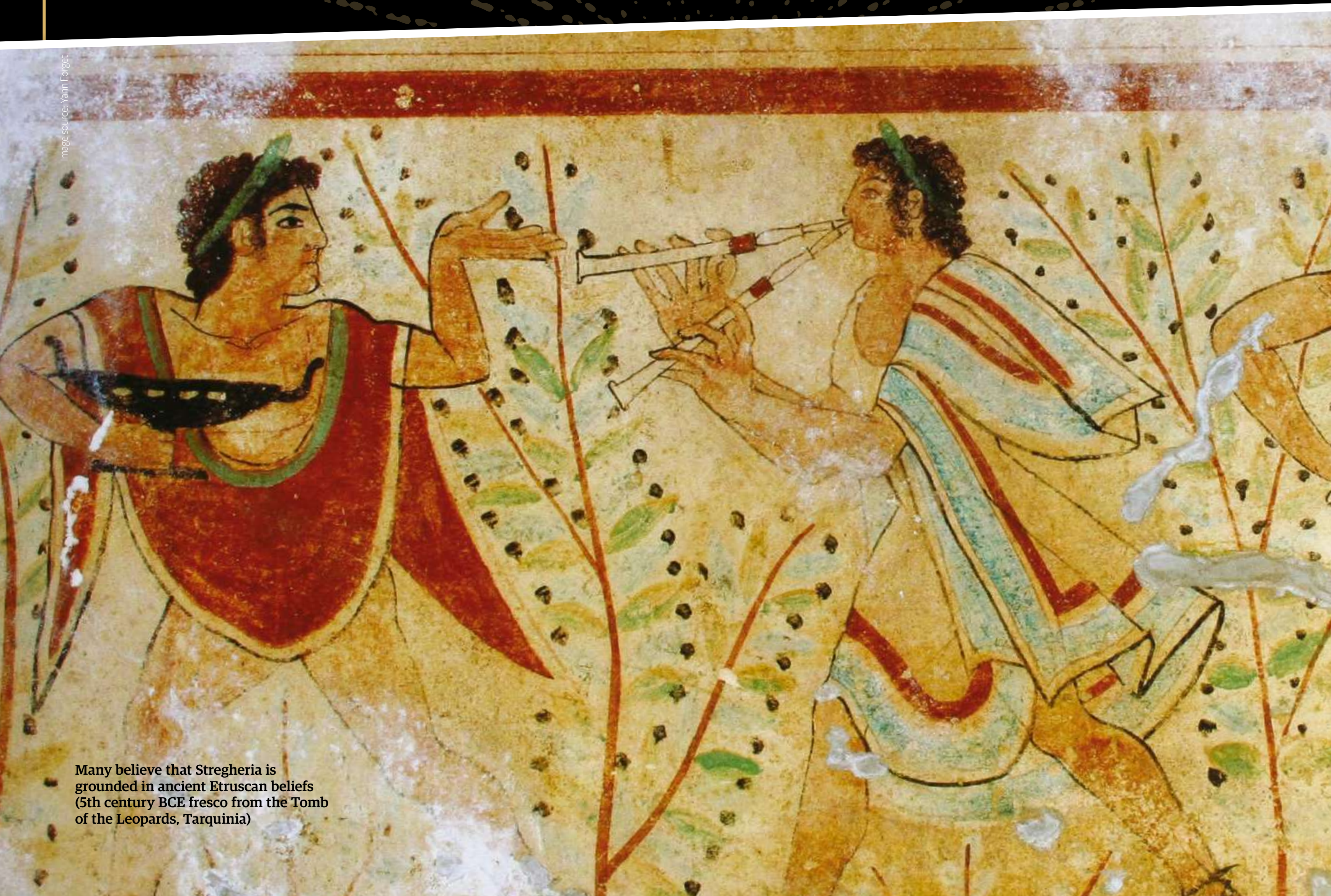
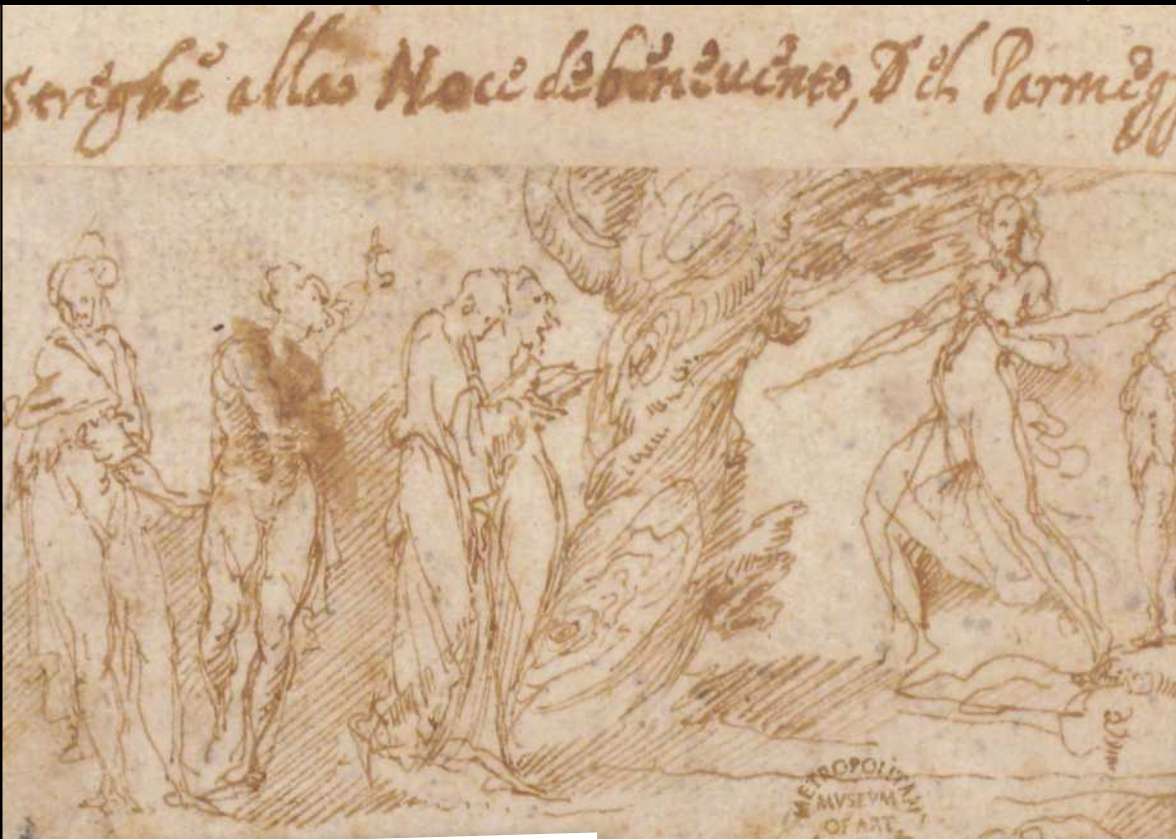


Image source: Yann Forget

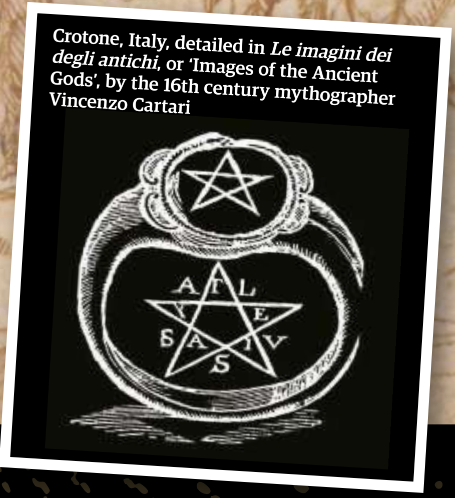
Many believe that Stregheria is grounded in ancient Etruscan beliefs (5th century BCE fresco from the Tomb of the Leopards, Tarquinia)


Streghe alla Noce de benevento, D'il Parmeggianin
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART NEW YORK

It was believed, as far back as the 13th century, that the town of Benevento was a meeting place for Italian witches

Image source: Guglielmo della Porta

Crotone, Italy, detailed in *Le imagini dei degli antichi*, or 'Images of the Ancient Gods', by the 16th century mythographer Vincenzo Cartari



brother-sister consorts, Diana – a Moon goddess associated with hunting and nature – the god Dianus, and their child, Aradia. While Leyland stated that Diana was 'Queen of Witches', and worshipped by witches in Tuscany, Grimassi stipulated that she was, in fact, an historical witch from 14th century Tuscany, Aradia di Toscano.

While debate as to the religion's true origin continues, modern Wicca was popularised during the 1940s and 50s, particularly in the writings and teachings of Gerald Gardner, a former British civil servant and adventurer who travelled widely during his lifetime. He was drawn to the exploration of pagan religions of Asia and Africa as well as the ways of the druids and other practitioners. Wicca today includes followers who gather in covens, generally of up to 15 members, who practise witchcraft and the worship of nature. They revere a female deity, or Goddess, and other associated deities.

The main focus of the tradition is ancestor worship of the lares, once Roman guardian deities. While some followers orientate their practice around the ancient Roman festivals, the tradition is distinct from historical Italian folk magic performed by the Christian population. This folk magic was not an organised set of practices – folk beliefs, customs and superstitions in Italy varied widely, blending seamlessly with local Catholicism. Many sources do exist detailing folk beliefs, yet these practices were purposefully never incorporated into Stregheria, which focuses on the worship of ancient deities, and the ancient Mystery Schools of the Mediterranean as a whole. Many followers seek to prove continuity with these ancient beliefs as a continuous tradition. A clear distinction is made between Stregheria and Stregoneria – the latter being an obscure Italian word indicating malevolent folk magic with intent to cause harm, not the Italian-American Pagan tradition. It is said that this tradition was passed within Italy through the female line, and included knowledge of healing, and making amulets and protective talismans.

> "The tradition is distinct from historical Italian folk magic"

# Hedgewitches, herbs and healing

While hedgewitchery conjures images of the traditional solitary witch stealing into the night to cut herbs under the full moon, how true to life is this idyll?

Written by Dee Dee Chainey

Hedgewitchery, sometimes known as green witchcraft, is a path of solitary, nature-based practice, and one of the oldest images of witchcraft around to this day. The term conjures images of flower-filled gardens and cottages lined with herb jars, ready for mixing into healing salves and ointments. And this image is not far from the truth. For many, the two main areas that characterise hedgecraft are wortcunning and hedge-riding.

While working in remote cottages and country lanes may be unfamiliar to many modern practitioners, plants and flowers take pride of place for even urban hedgewitches – this specialist knowledge is known as wortcunning. As skilled herbalists, many roam the city streets, foraging for plants with specific properties and medicinal herbs, and combing coastal areas for magical ingredients and wild foods.

Hedge-riding, or 'flying the hedge', is work on the astral, or otherworldly, plane – which may include astral projection, conducting spirit work or setting up a workspace in the Otherworld for meditation and performing spellwork. Divination is also central to the practices of many hedgewitches, and can take the form of tarot reading, or the casting of bones. In some ways, the tradition is similar to neo-shamanism, in that it centres around liminality and the crossing of boundaries. When hedge-riding, practitioners sit or lie calmly, often surrounding themselves with candles, burning herbs or incense to evoke the required atmosphere and energies for their work, and always ground themselves before beginning astral travel. Many use sound as an aid, like a drum or music, and focus on regulating their breathing to help move them into an altered state.

While hedgewitches don't always cast magic circles, they do use other forms of protection during their journeying work to keep them safe from otherworldly beings – both positive and negative in nature. Most important is to meet with their otherworldly animal guide, a type of familiar spirit, which will accompany them on their journey in the spirit world. Many use visualisation to create a protective barrier, for example by seeing a dome of light around themselves. Others prefer to hold objects that anchor them to the normal, physical realm when hedge-riding, to always provide a link to their bodies, and ensure that they are able to return to their normal state of being as they emerge from their trance. Such items can include personal amulets and talismans, or crystals with specific grounding properties.

> "Plants and flowers take pride of place for even urban hedgewitches"

Image source: Unsplash

Crystals like hematite or amethyst are often used during hedge-riding, as they are believed to offer psychic protection and ward off negative energy

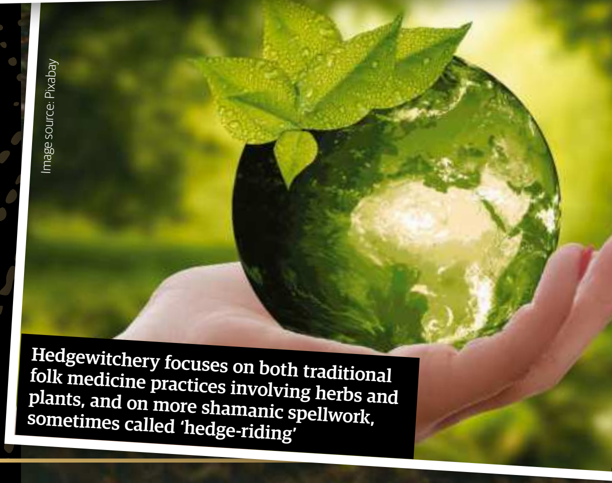


Image source: Pixabay

Hedgewitchery focuses on both traditional folk medicine practices involving herbs and plants, and on more shamanic spellwork, sometimes called 'hedge-riding'

Image source: Unsplash

Firmly grounded in nature, hedgewitchery is a practice that involves tapping in to the planet's natural resources, and living in line with the rhythms of the natural world

Image source: Unsplash

Ecological issues like recycling and climate change are often very prominent issues for hedgewitches today, many of whom take an active role in green campaigns

# Druidry: Myth, magic and music

Followers of druidry believe that their traditions are rooted in ancient Celtic practices that were once found throughout the British Isles and across Europe

Written by April Madden

A lot of assumptions have been made about druidry throughout history. Yes, the ancient druids may have performed human sacrifice. No, that sort of thing is definitely frowned upon now. Yes, they do spend rather a lot of time at Stonehenge, given the chance. No, they aren't all men, in the same way that witches aren't all women. Yes, they're very fond of trees. No, you don't have to be Welsh, Irish or Cornish to be a druid, but yes, you're right, they do tend to have lovely singing voices.

Modern druidry can trace its roots to the Celtic Revival, a renaissance of ancient to early medieval northwestern European culture and aesthetics during the late Victorian and early Edwardian eras. Followers of the Celtic Revival, which embraced epic poetry and the La Tène motifs that influenced the Art Nouveau art style, were typically bohemian, creative, and drawn to the occult; a key figure in the Celtic Revival was the Irish poet WB Yeats, famous for his affiliation with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Other Golden Dawn initiates with a fascination for western Europe included ceremonial magician Dion Fortune, who believed that the last vestiges of mythical Atlantis could be found in the legends of Arthurian Britain.

The adherents of the Celtic Revival were casting around for an evocative ancestor culture to replace the Anglo-Saxon one that they had become increasingly disaffected with. The traditional pagan poetic imagery of Saxon England was distinctly Norse-inflected and Germanic, problematic when seen in the light of Germany's increasingly martial attitude towards Britain in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. To fill the hole in what had become a folkloric void, they settled on the culture of the ancient Celts. The problem is, the Celts were never a unified civilisation in the same way as, say, the Romans were. In fact, the people that we call Celts were a loose diaspora of tribes who had similar social, cultural and religious practices. Julius Caesar, writing about the people of northwestern Europe after his invasion of Gaul, neatly packaged these diverse Indo-Europeans into one barbaric whole that he set in opposition

Druidic practice focuses on identifying and harmonising with elements of the natural world, particularly the energies of the Sun and Earth

Image source: Thinkstock

Many druids visit Stonehenge and other ancient sites on solstices, equinoxes and other sacred days to celebrate their faith

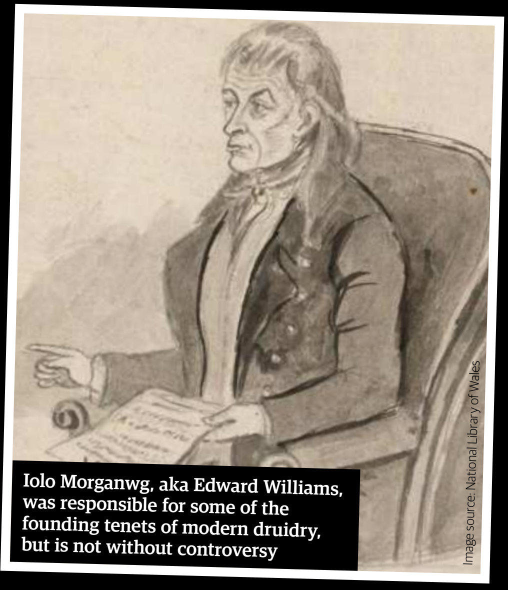
Image source: Getty

to organised, civilised Rome, labelling them with a name that had been used since the 6th century BCE to describe tribes living across vast tracts of the continent, from the shores of Ireland all the way to modern-day Turkey. And running their exotic, barbaric society from behind the scenes, in the same way as the Zoroastrian Magi ran the courts of ancient Persia, Caesar placed the mystic, mysterious, wood-wise priesthood of the druids.

In ancient tradition, druids were keepers of lore and law. They were teachers, singers, musicians, storytellers, politicians and healers. Their relationship to the natural world was one of harmony and harmonics. It's possible that Caesar was something of a fan. Two people who were definitely huge fans by the time the 18th century rolled around were Edward Williams and James Macpherson. Williams was a Welshman who preferred the Cymric dignity of his 'bardic name', Iolo Morganwg; Macpherson – or as he would rather, Seumas Mac a' Phearsain – was a Scot. Both were literary, scholarly gentlemen given to collecting ancient British folklore; they strongly identified with the magical faith of their forefathers and were ardent advocates of its stirring, romantic, chivalric tenets. Unfortunately, both of them were also forgers. Between them, they invented significant tracts of the Welsh Triads and an entire Irish bard. Much of what the Celtic Revivalists initially knew of the druids came from their work, and it's impossible to say how much their atavistic longings for a past that may or may not have existed coloured their – and our – notions of it. The original druids were mystery-cultists and oral historians; the only empirical evidence that we have for what they believed and how they expressed it are the writings of Caesar and a few other classical scholars, and a loose scattering of archaeological artefacts. These are at best hard to find in the crowded earth of Britain, Ireland and northern France, packed as it is with the relics of a thousand and more years of further history, and are at worst oblique, mute objects that we shrug over and label as 'ceremonial' for lack of a better explanation. Ancient druidry, therefore, is a largely blank slate that – as Morganwg and Macpherson found – could have innumerable ideas projected onto it. Some of those ideas stuck.

The ancient druids left no written records of their faith; the modern form is a reconstruction based on myth and historical data

Modern druids, like most Pagans, are very focused on the natural world, which is seen as sacred and imbued with divine spirit. Its deities (druids, like many other Pagans, tend to choose which goddesses and gods they feel most connected to, often with an emphasis on Brythonic and Celtic myth) are seen as immanent, rather than transcendent – that is, they are spiritually, palpably 'there' in a sacred site rather than inhabiting an otherworldly 'heaven' (although druidry does allow for the concept of spiritual 'otherworlds'). Druids are famous for worshipping at Stonehenge and other prehistoric sites, notably on the summer and winter solstices, but in actual fact the majority of their worship takes place in the natural world. Popular locations include quiet hilltops, meadows, and especially woodland – druids often refer to both a small worship group and the place that they most often worship in as a 'grove'- although even a back garden will do. The reason that many



Iolo Morganwg, aka Edward Williams, was responsible for some of the founding tenets of modern druidry, but is not without controversy

Image source: National Library of Wales

"The original druids were mystery-cultists and oral historians"

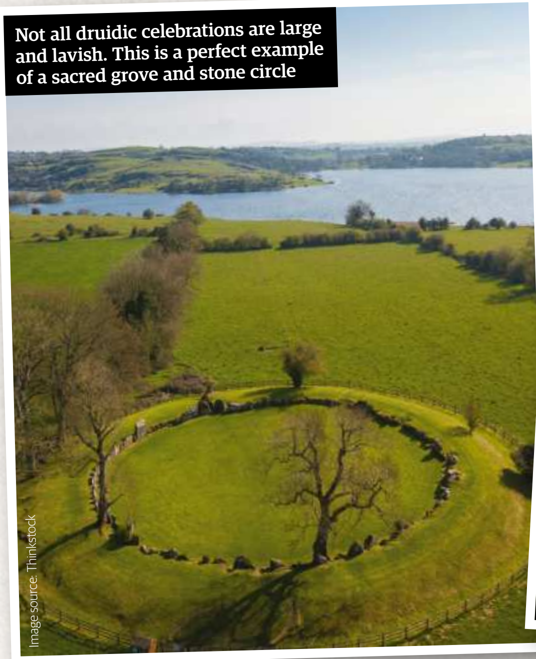

Not all druidic celebrations are large and lavish. This is a perfect example of a sacred grove and stone circle

Image source: Thinkstock

Druids celebrate the winter solstice at Stonehenge. The site is a focal point for druidic celebrations

Image source: Alamy

larger ceremonies focus on prehistoric sites is partially due to the druidic respect for ancestor spirits, and partially due to the alignment of these sites with the Sun at certain times of the year, allowing druids to connect with what they believe was their ancestors' deep understanding of the rhythms of the universe. Many believe in ley lines and earth energies, which they believe are concentrated more powerfully, sometimes in particular sacred shapes like spirals and pentacles, at such sites. In rites, some druids may favour ceremonial robes, typically in white or earth colours; they may carry wooden staves (often made from a type of wood that's spiritually relevant to the practitioner) and wear crowns of leaves and flowers, or sometimes a hooded cloak. Some may be just as happy in jeans and a t-shirt. Rites are generally held in daylight ("By the eye of the sun"), and involve the casting of a sacred circle, an offering (generally of bread or cake and wine, beer or mead) to the gods, and a mix of personal and public prayer, generally aimed towards peace, harmony and healing. Druids are highly focused on music, and this, whether vocal, instrumental, or both, is often a key - and very beautiful - part of their ceremonies.

Something that really sets modern druids apart from other Pagan faiths is the concept of 'awen'. Awen is best described as spiritual energy, particularly in relation to inspiration and creativity. The word, or the similar-sounding 'A-I-O', is often chanted like a mantra at druidic ceremonies to help shift the participants' consciousness into a state of flow, allowing them to attune themselves with this force. Awen can be both an abstract idea of flowing energy or the personification of inspiration, like a Greek Muse. It's not a deity, but more akin to the elemental earth energies many druids believe that they can sense and experience. It's often symbolised by a design of three sunrays. Awen today is invoked gently and ritualistically, but a 12th century text - the *Description of Wales* by Giraldus Cambrensis - describes it happening to people unlooked-for, typically preceded by a bout of mania and a short sleep, in which the inspired would often dream that they had honey, milk, or written words applied to their mouth (one 17th century letter describes the tale of a shepherd who dreamt that a hawk flew into his mouth; he then became the country's pre-eminent bard). The concept is even mentioned in the Welsh national anthem.

> Today's idea of 'Earth mysteries' grew out of some of the research done by Celtic Revivalists into the tenets of the ancient druidic faith

Like witchcraft, druidry is practiced in both graded, organised orders and as a personal faith that participants may share with a few other likeminded individuals or keep entirely private. Those who adhere to the more structured variant may proceed through a system of ranks known as Bard, Ovate and Druid, gaining more knowledge and responsibilities as they move upwards through grades of initiation. For many, however, druidry is a deeply personal practice rooted in nature, inspiration, music and story; the innate spirituality of a magical realm connecting the Earth and the stars, and has no need for tests or for titles.

## Culture and esoterica

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, caused consternation back in 2002 when he was initiated as a druid by the Gorsedd of Bards. Anglicans questioned why the most senior clergyman in the Church of England was deliberately affiliating himself to a Pagan religion. In fact there are two types of druid, both inspired by the resurgence of interest in traditional British cultures during the Celtic Revival.

'Cultural druids' are not always practicing Pagans - in fact, like the Reverend Dr Williams, many of them are devout Christians. Cultural druids are typically involved in Welsh or Cornish folk traditions, particularly related to the bardic arts like music and poetry, participating in events called gorsedd - meetings of contemporary bards - and Eisteddfodau (Welsh-language festivals celebrating arts, performance and literature). Attested since at least the 12th century, the tradition was revived in the 18th century by Iolo Morganwg, proving that despite his flagrant inventions, he was nonetheless deeply committed to his goal of reviving ancient Welsh tradition and tales. Pagan druids are sometimes referred to as 'esoteric' or 'believing' druids in order to differentiate the two kinds. As a faith, Pagan druidry's theology is capable of encompassing syncretic elements from religions as diverse as Christianity, Buddhism and Judaism - there are even practitioners who combine it with pop-culture elements inspired by contemporary sci-fi. Yes, there are probably Jedi druids.

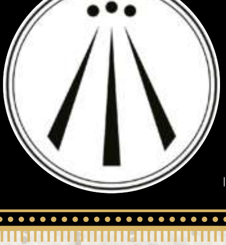

**The Awen symbol can represent both esoteric druidry and the secular, cultural druids of the Gorsedd**

Image source: MithrandirMage

Modern heathens draw on the deep history of polytheistic worship from Northern Europe to inspire their faiths

# Heathenry today

Pagan faiths have always existed but modern groups are leading a resurgence in the worship of ancestral gods

Written by Ben Gazur

The first people to be called 'pagans' were the polytheistic people in the Italian countryside in the 4th century CE. Coming from the Latin 'Paganus' meaning 'rustic' or 'rural', it was a term of contempt used by Christians to paint those outside their faith as backwards. To the pagans of the time they were simply performing the religion of their ancestors and felt no need to label themselves. Today, however, there are many groups that will proudly call themselves Pagans. 'Heathen' has a similar past as a term of abuse. Heathens, as the polytheists in the lands around the North Sea were called, can now be found in countries around the globe.

Modern heathenry is mainly based around the historical religions of the Norse and Germanic tribes. Romanticism played a large part in the rebirth of heathenry, as the romantics of 19th century Germany turned away from the order of reason and looked to the wild powers of nature for sacred truths. A number of 'völkisch' religions, those claiming to represent the ancestral faith of the German people, sprang up. They gained some popularity but became fatally associated with the rise of the Nazis and their ideas of a German ethnostate. When the Reich collapsed many chose to bury their heathen faith in the rubble.

The loosening of Christianity's hold on religion and morality, as well as the general acceptance of 'New Age' faiths, saw a resurgence in interest in heathen religion later in the 20th century. Across Northern Europe and in the United States people began to look to Norse and Germanic traditions for spiritual inspiration.

Heathenry can be perceived as a religion of nature, with much of the practice of the faith taking place outside. Heathens attempt to build a relationship with the gods and the powers they represent. How they do this differs from group to group, as there is no central religious authority. Some heathens worship in ways that derive from divine revelations they have personally experienced. Others demand a more historically based method and look to ancient sources.

There are many poems, tales, and pieces of folklore that can be mined for clues to how the Norse performed their religious rites. The *Sagas* and *Eddas* from Iceland are a particularly rich source of information on the Norse gods. Full of tales of Odin's wisdom,

Thor's might, and the great and terrible fates of heroes, the stories preserved there hark back to an age of warriors and righteousness. It is in Iceland that heathenry has had its most successful rebirth.

Iceland came relatively late to Christianity, as it was only converted in the year 1000. Even then there were those that forged a path between Christianity and Norse Paganism. We are told of Helgi the Half-Christian, who worshipped Jesus on land, but looked for Thor's protection at sea. A strong folk belief in elves and other powers also persisted in Iceland long after they withered in other places. This has made Iceland a fertile land for the resowing of heathenry and Ásatrú, as heathenry is known there, is Iceland's fastest growing faith.

Ásatrúarfélagið (Asatru Fellowship) – belief in the Norse gods, or Æsir – was officially recognised as a religion in 1973. When meeting with the minister responsible for acknowledging new religions, thunder and lightning left the ministry building without power. Thor's seeming intervention may have prompted the minister to recognise Ásatrú as a faith despite the misgivings of some Christian bishops. Since then they have had the right to officiate at ceremonies such as marriages. The last temple to the Norse gods was built

The Norse name for what is now known as heathenry is 'Ásatrú', which derives from 'Æsir', the Old Norse word for some of the gods

Image source: Getty

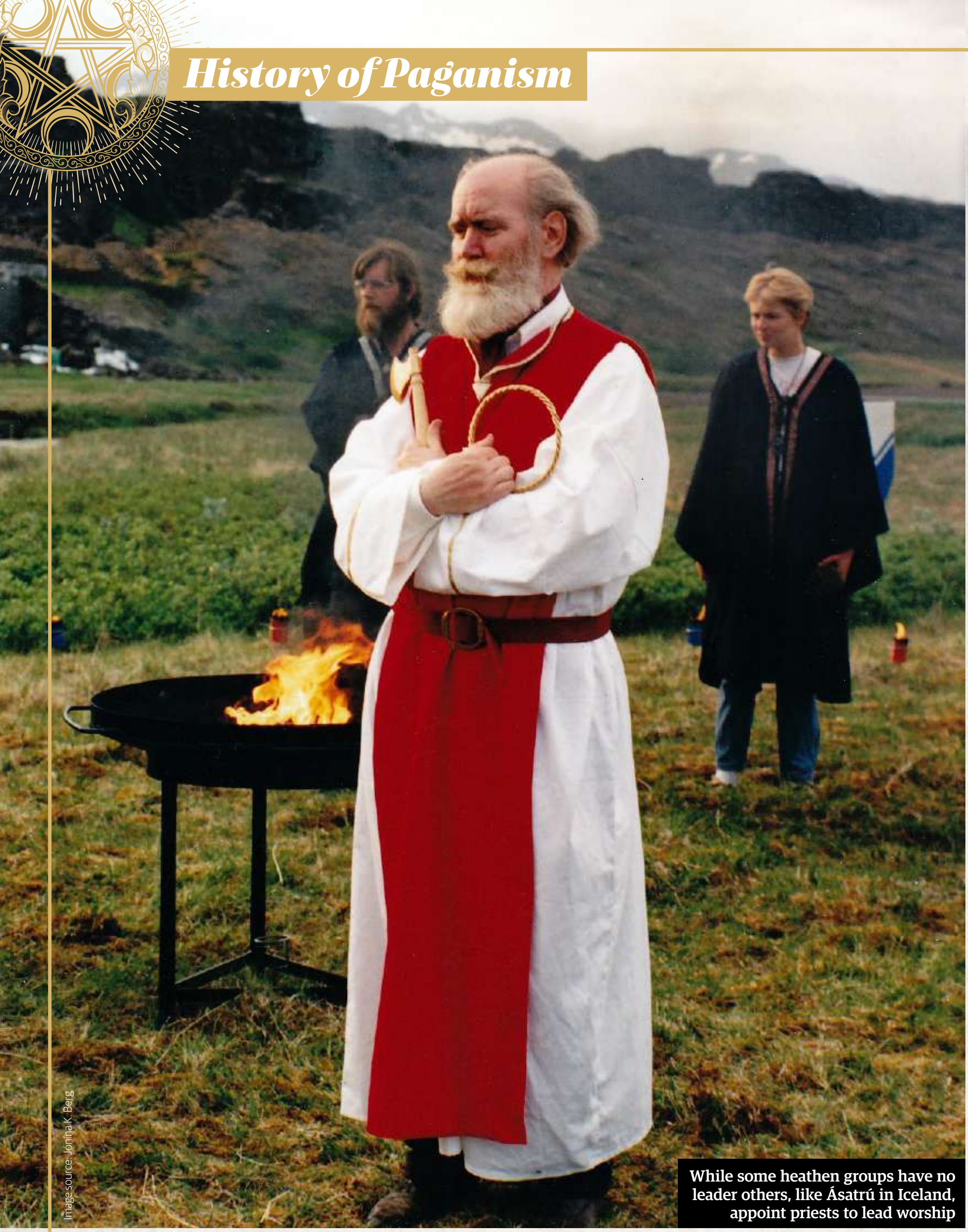


Image source: Jónína K. Berg

While some heathen groups have no leader others, like Ásatrú in Iceland, appoint priests to lead worship

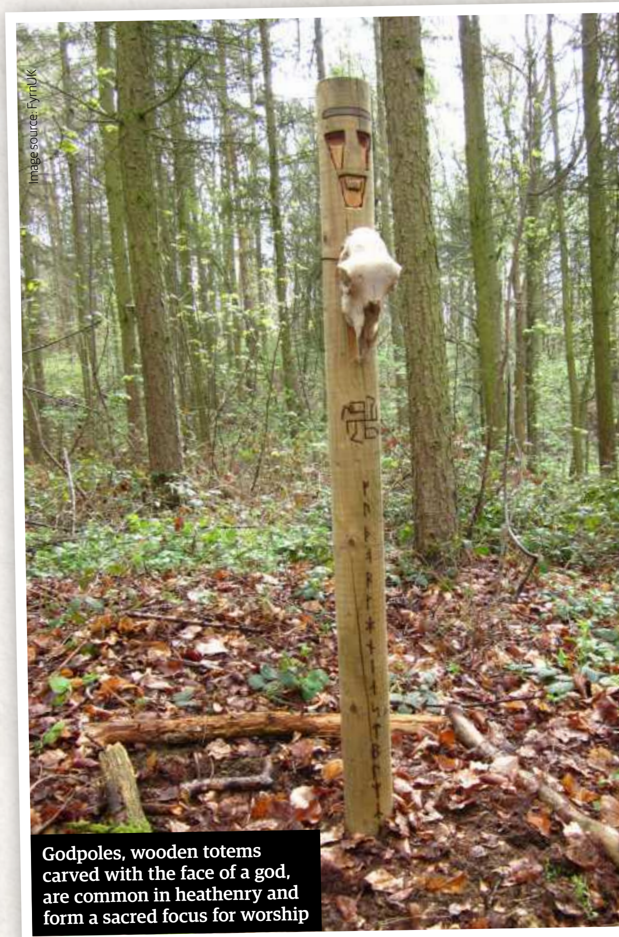


Image source: FyrnUK

Godpoles, wooden totems carved with the face of a god, are common in heathenry and form a sacred focus for worship

> “The last temple was built almost 1000 years ago, but today in Iceland one is being erected”

almost a thousand years ago, but today in Iceland one is being erected. The hof, or hall, is being constructed so that the dome aligns with the sky at certain times of the year and will be home to statues of the old Norse gods. It is due to be completed by the end of 2019 and will be open to all who wish to come and observe the rites of Ásatrú in action.

The practice of heathenry varies among denominations but there are certain rituals and events common to most believers. The outdoor shrines of heathens often feature godpoles. Carved wooden poles with the face of a deity, these form the focal point of worship and are mentioned in several old texts. Idols of the gods may also be used around a pile of stones called a ‘horgr’ that acts as an altar where offerings can be placed. Given the general lack of temples it is to godpoles and shrines that most heathens go to perform their rituals.

Blot, from an old Norse word meaning sacrifice, are held to celebrate the gods, spirits, and ancestors. Today animals are not slaughtered, but other offerings are made. In Ásatrú there are four main Blot that are held at the summer and winter solstice, the first day of winter, and one in spring. The ritual of the Blot is not the same for all heathens, but most take place outdoors. For many the offering used to invoke the gods is a bowl of mead, which a priest may sprinkle over the altar. Chants and recitations from Norse texts are made and the ceremony is often followed by a feast of fellowship for the worshippers.

The feast may consist of a symbel or sumbl - a holy drinking contest. Following accounts in poems like *Beowulf* and the *Sagas,* the symbel consists of a group raising toasts to the gods and spirits. Some groups may share a communion by each drinking mead from the same horn. The first round of drinking is often to the gods, the second to spirits, and the third to whatever the drinker desires. Symbel can also be a time for admitting new members to a group. Oaths of loyalty to the others in a kindred, as some groups call themselves, can be made as symbels before a worshipper is admitted to the hearth. Because heathenry is relatively rare it is often the case that people worship alone in solitary rites.

Seiðr is a type of magic mentioned in Norse myth that involves the shaping of the future. Modern heathens experience seiðr as an altered state of consciousness that allows them to enter a trance. In groups one person may be the focus of chanting and drumming that drives them into an oracular state, while individual heathens may use meditation or drugs to achieve conversation with the gods.

There are no set texts for heathens and no instructions that every heathen must follow. This has allowed for a heterogeneous faith with many

Image source: Gunnar Creutz

**Unlike at historical Blot, modern heathens generally do not sacrifice animals but offer food and drink to gods on altars**

interpretations and expressions of belief. Some heathens are ecologically motivated and feel the gods are aspects of nature and to be respected. Others think that the gods are examples of right action that should be emulated. Others still use the fellowship they find in their heathen groups to explore their place in the universe. But as with every faith there are those who use it for less humane ends.

If one has the misfortune to find oneself at a white nationalist rally one is likely to see a profusion of Norse runes. Runic symbols with their sharp edges and spiky forms have found a home with those who like violent imagery and hateful ideology. The German SS used two Sig runes as their symbol.

It is not just the language of Norse religion that has been claimed by some racist organisations. Some heathen groups cling to an idea of racial purity. Just as the first 'völkisch' re-imaginings of Norse religion harked back to an Aryan past in Germany, some right-wing groups have appropriated the entire religion as 'proof' of their imagined superiority.

Certain Wodinists, or Odinists, have made the claim that they are the pure and authentic heirs to the Norse religion. They feel that their ancestors were suppressed by Christians. This often leads to anti-Semitism, as they also blame Jewish people for the downfall of Norse faith. They exclude people of other races from their groups because they think that religion is somehow a genetic trait.

Those who have studied Norse faith closely find nothing in the texts to support these arguments. Priests of Ásatrú in Iceland have called the perversion of their beliefs by racist groups obscene. If a person wants to be racist they will always find justification for their view in any religion. The Ásatrú counter this perception of heathenry as inherently discriminatory by welcoming all and practising kindness to all.

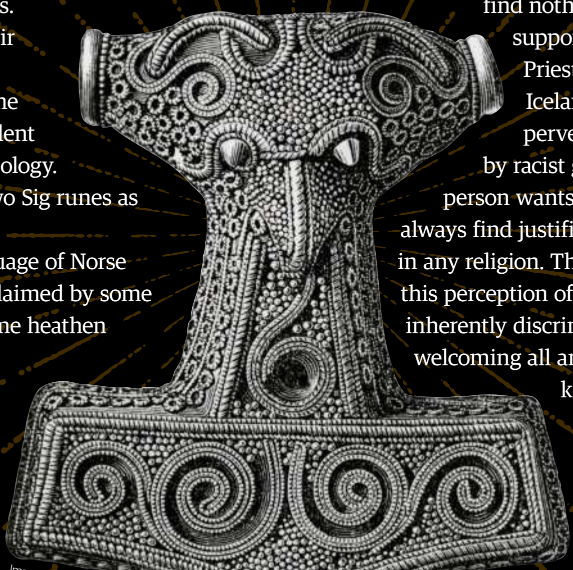


Image source: Kongl. Vitterhets Historie och Antiqvitets Akademiens Månadsblad (1895)

**One of the most popular symbols of both ancient Norse religions and modern heathenry is Mjollnir – Thor's hammer**

## Casting the runes

Magic has always been integral to Norse paganism. The powers of the gods were shared by the inherent power of the universe. Those who knew the secrets of nature were able to tap into those powers and use them for their own purposes. The Viking *Sagas* tell of magicians and seers, often women known as Volva, who even Odin himself would consult.

Today heathens may use trances to foretell the future but they can also turn to the casting of runes. Stones are carved with runes and placed into a vessel. Charms called *galdr* are recited over the stones as a user shakes them. The person then asks the runes a question and pulls out the stones as the gods guide them. Each rune has a meaning that allows the future to be divined. Fehu means wealth while Isaz means the unknown. Depending on the order in which they are drawn the user constructs the message being sent to them.

Some rune-casters feel that the runes carry direct messages from the gods or are guided by *Wyrd*, the fate that governs the universe. Others believe they are merely a psychological tool for the working out of one's own thoughts.

**Runes represented not just phonetic sounds but also symbolic ones that were used in constructing charms and secondary meanings**

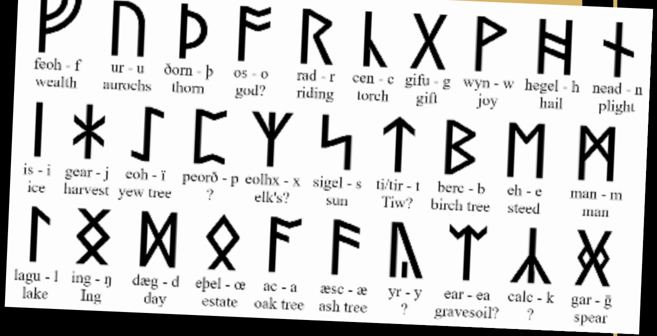
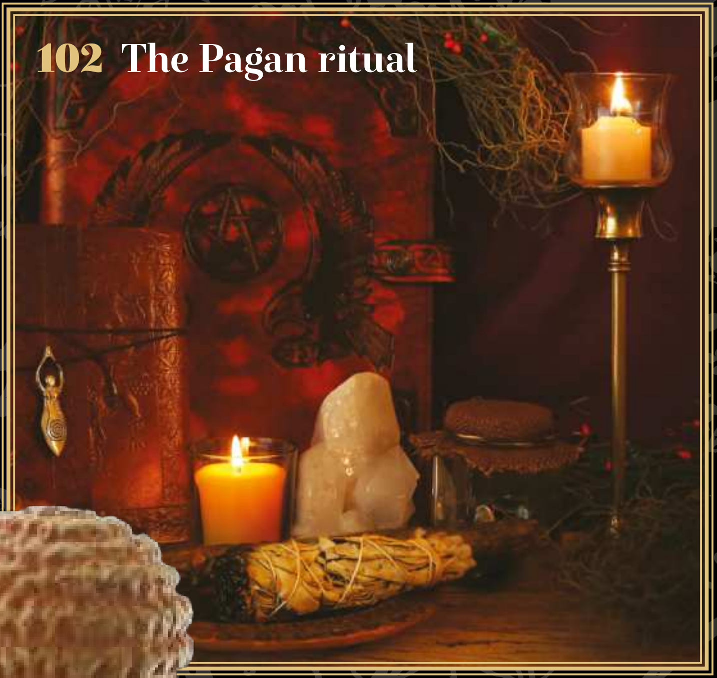
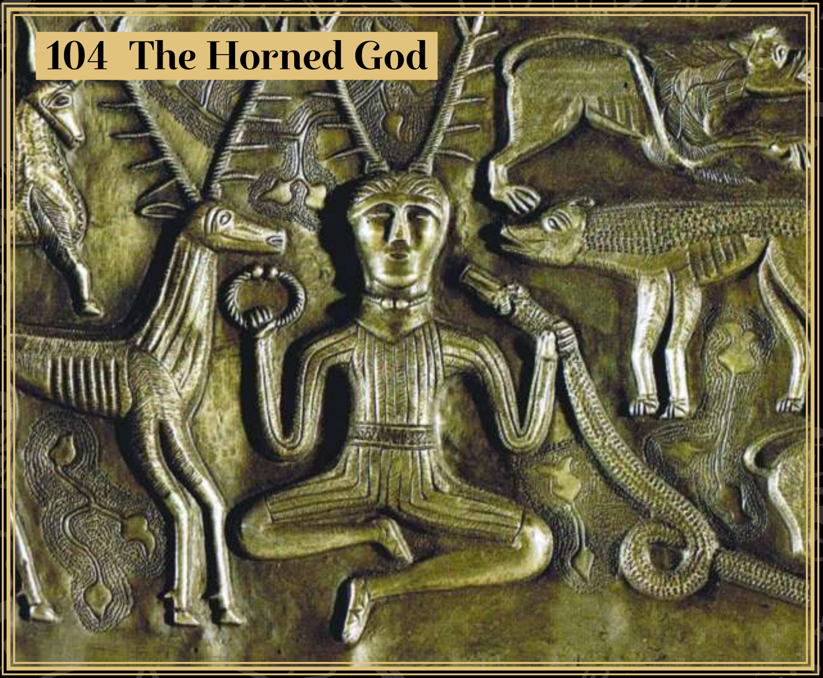


Image source: Blodcyning

# GODS AND FESTIVALS



102 The Pagan ritual



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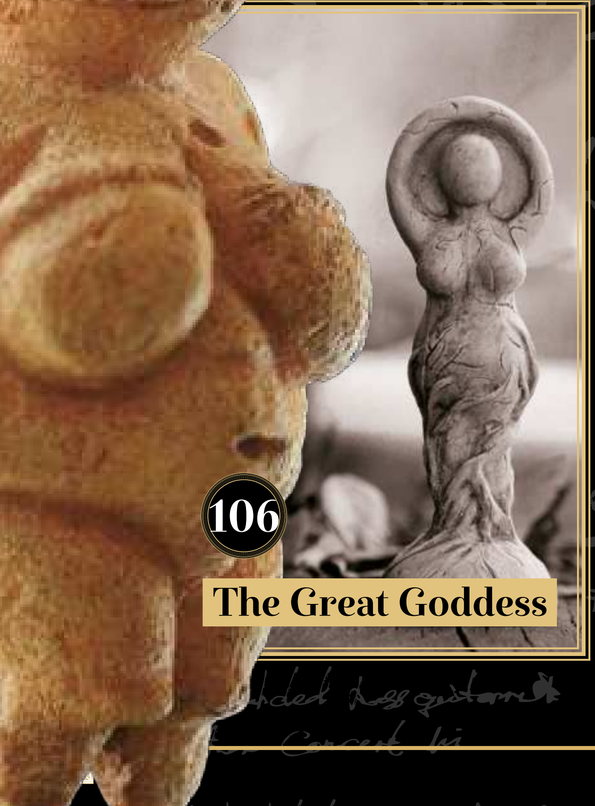

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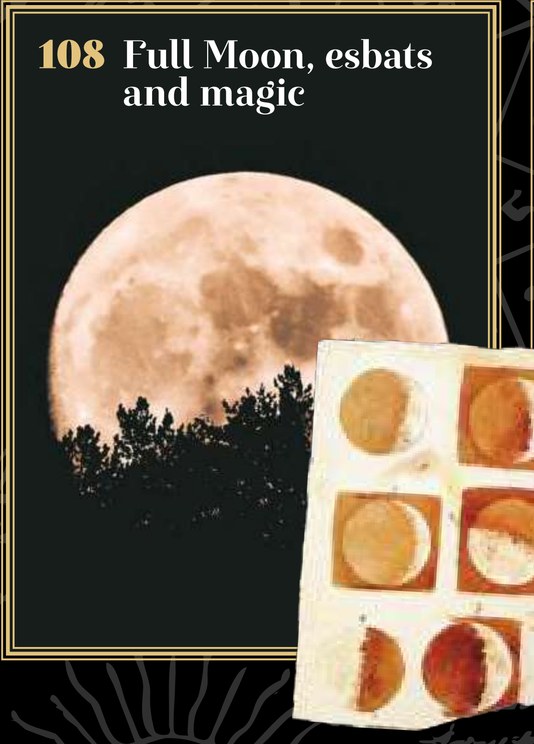
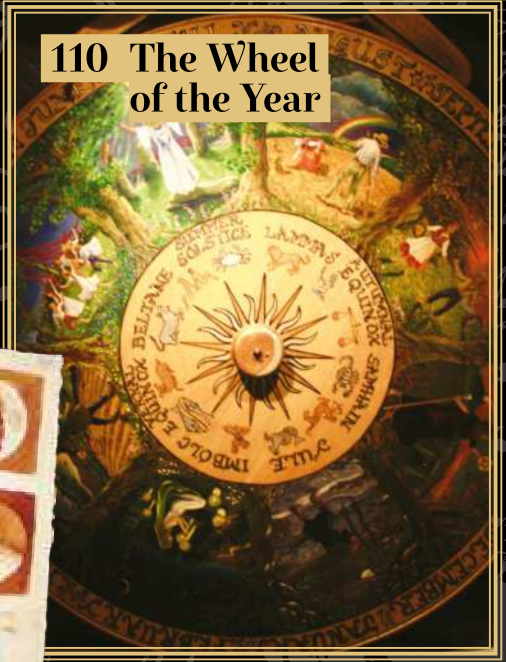


108 Full Moon, esbats and magic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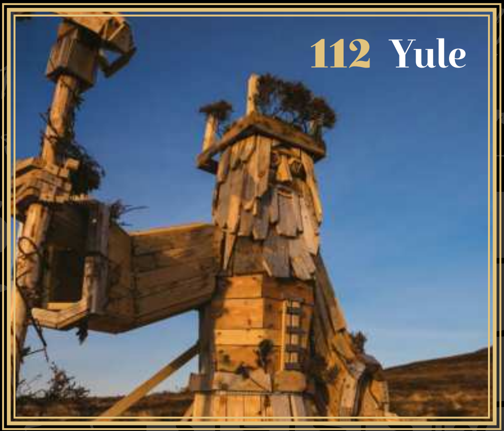
110 The Wheel of the Year



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114 Imbolc

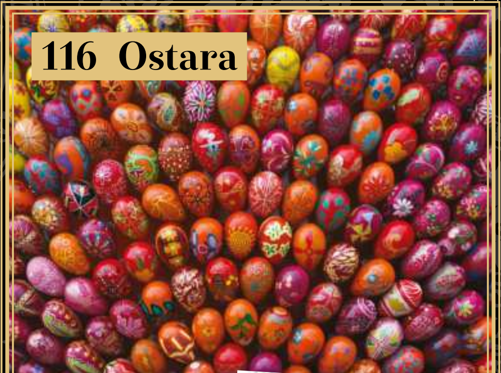

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Image source: Pixabay

# The Pagan ritual

Rituals and spellworking sound nefarious to the uninitiated, yet for many they are an everyday expression of their spiritual beliefs

Written by Dee Dee Chainey

Pagan rituals vary depending on the tradition of practitioners, the time of year or the occasion they happen for – whether a sabbat, esbat or private spellwork. Some rituals are performed in groups, with a High Priestess and High Priest to help lead them, others are conducted alone. They can take place outside, or indoors, with participants wearing whatever feels comfortable.

An altar is usually set up at the centre of a space, or at the most northern area of a magic circle. Various items are kept on the altar, depending on personal beliefs: a statue of the deities worshipped, often the Goddess and the Horned God, along with a ritual blade – or athame – to represent the phallic male energy, a chalice – a vessel representing female energy – and a wand. Often items representing the elements appear: a bowl of salt for earth; incense for air; a candle to represent fire, often white or a colour that corresponds to the current season or festival.

For most, a grounding meditation is performed before the ritual begins, to make sure everyone is prepared. This is usually also done at the end of the ritual, to prepare the practitioners for their return to a normal state of mind.

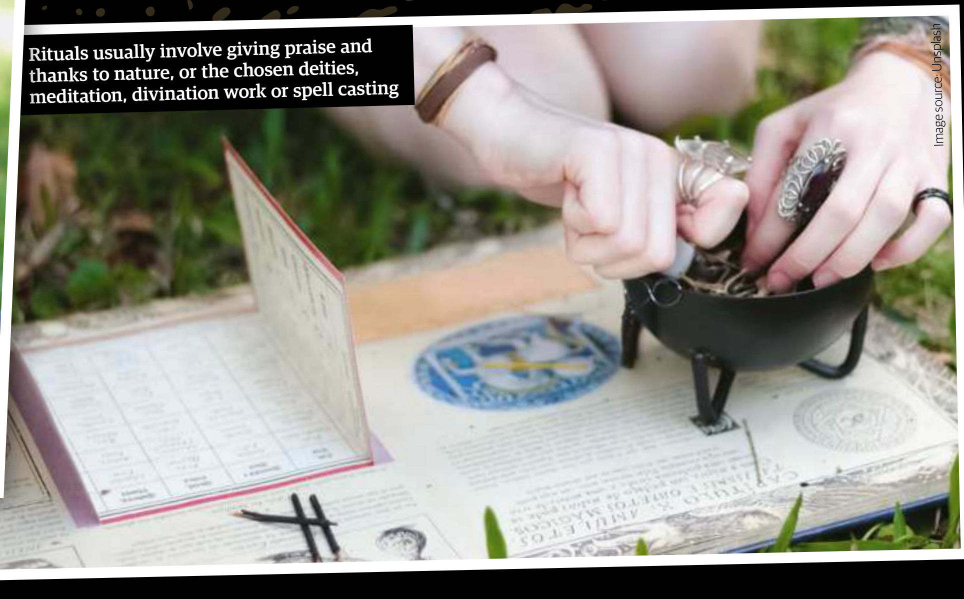
Most common for ritual work is the casting of a magic circle. These are used for protection against negative energies and entities. While the method of casting varies, one practice is to first call the four quarters – or cardinal points on the compass – along with their corresponding energies, by lighting candles at each point. Often, north is the direction of the earth element, represented by a green candle; east is air, for which a light coloured candle is used; south is fire, so red is used; west is water, for which blue is most common. Practitioners will first go to the north, light the candle, and call upon the spirits of each element to witness and protect the rite, then call the other quarters in the same way, using the relevant element and symbolism for each. After this, the wand, or athame, is usually used to draw around the circle, and items representing the elements can be carried round if practitioners wish to.

This is the point at which worship, praise and dedications can be made, usually in the form of poems, chants, prayer, or offerings like food, wine or flowers. Certain traditions require different things to happen during the ritual. Wiccans often use traditional texts like Drawing Down the Moon, and The Charge of the Goddess, to draw the goddess energy into the circle, and help the High Priestess to embody the Goddess for the duration of the ceremony. Meditation, divination or spellwork usually follow. Sometimes tarot or oracle cards are consulted. Candle magic is commonplace in rituals.

What happens during the ritual is very much personal choice, based on the beliefs and practices on the individual or group. The ceremony concludes with banishing the circle by visiting the cardinal points in reverse, extinguishing the candles, and bidding farewell to the spirits that were initially called, to close the sacred space.

Image source: Pixabay

Many modern Pagans use an altar, which might include seasonal plants and candles, ritual tools and representations of the gods and goddesses



Rituals usually involve giving praise and thanks to nature, or the chosen deities, meditation, divination work or spell casting

Image source: Unsplash

# The Horned God

With his stags' antlers, the Horned God is animalistic nature, depicting a raw, primal sexual energy as he leads the Wild Hunt through Britain's forests

Written by Dee Dee Chainey

The Horned God is a male deity worshipped as one of the main pantheon by many modern day Pagans. He is linked to the wild woods, fertility and masculinity. The Horned God is the personification of animal energy, and represents the primal animal within all of us, showing how we are connected, intrinsically, to the natural world around.

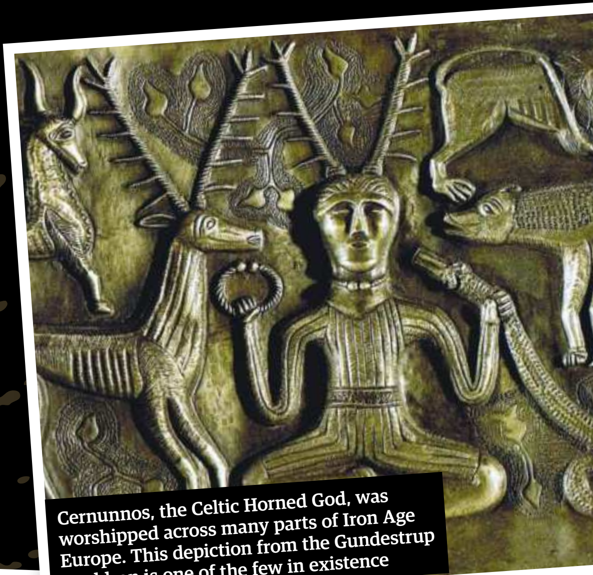
Wicca is a dualistic tradition that reveres the Horned God as the counterpart to the Goddess, and the festivals of the Wheel of the Year chart the ebb and flow of their relationship. The god is believed to be born at the Yule (the Winter Solstice), impregnates the fertile Goddess at Beltane by performing 'the Great Rite', and dies at either Lammas, Mabon (the Autumn Equinox), or Samhain, depending on personal beliefs. The idea of the cyclical birth and death of the God forms the foundation of the Wheel of the Year, and gives the central ideas of rebirth and renewal to the Wiccan calendar. Some split the God into two aspects: the Holly and Oak Kings, representing the dark and light halves of the year. The Oak King conquers the Holly King at Yule, and reigns until Litha (the summer solstice), when the Holly King defeats him in return. There are four types of god in Wicca: vegetation god, solar deity and sacrificed god, with the Horned God being the most widely revered. Of ten all of the variants are amalgamated into the figure of the Horned God, and he is sometimes conflated with the Green Man, while others see these as different beings entirely.

> The Wild Hunt can be combined with the 'sleeping hero' motif in the UK - some legends have King Arthur or even Francis Drake as its leader

For many Pagans, the god Cernunnos is the embodiment of the Horned God. While his name is only mentioned once, on the Pillar of the Boatmen in the 1st century CE, the image of him as a cross-legged figure with stag's horns is widespread, with the most famous depiction appearing on the Gundestrup Cauldron. Many believe he was worshipped across much of Europe in the Gallo-Roman period, as a god of fertility, animals and the underworld.

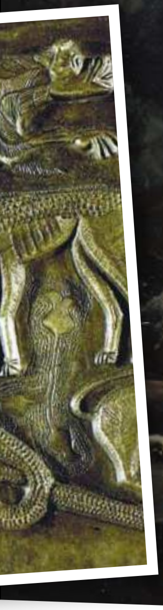
In England, many see the Horned God as Herne, a god of the Wild Hunt. The earliest mention of him is in Shakespeare; a spirit that haunts Windsor Forest, some say in the form of a stag. Later it was said that he was the ghost of an Elizabethan forest keeper who hung himself. Today, he is seen as a manifestation of the Horned God, and equated with Cernunnos.

> "In England, many see the Horned God as Herne, a god of the Wild Hunt"



Cernunnos, the Celtic Horned God, was worshipped across many parts of Iron Age Europe. This depiction from the Gundestrup Cauldron is one of the few in existence

A model of the Wiccan Horned God from the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, Boscastle, Cornwall, shows him as a humanoid goat wearing a claret robe



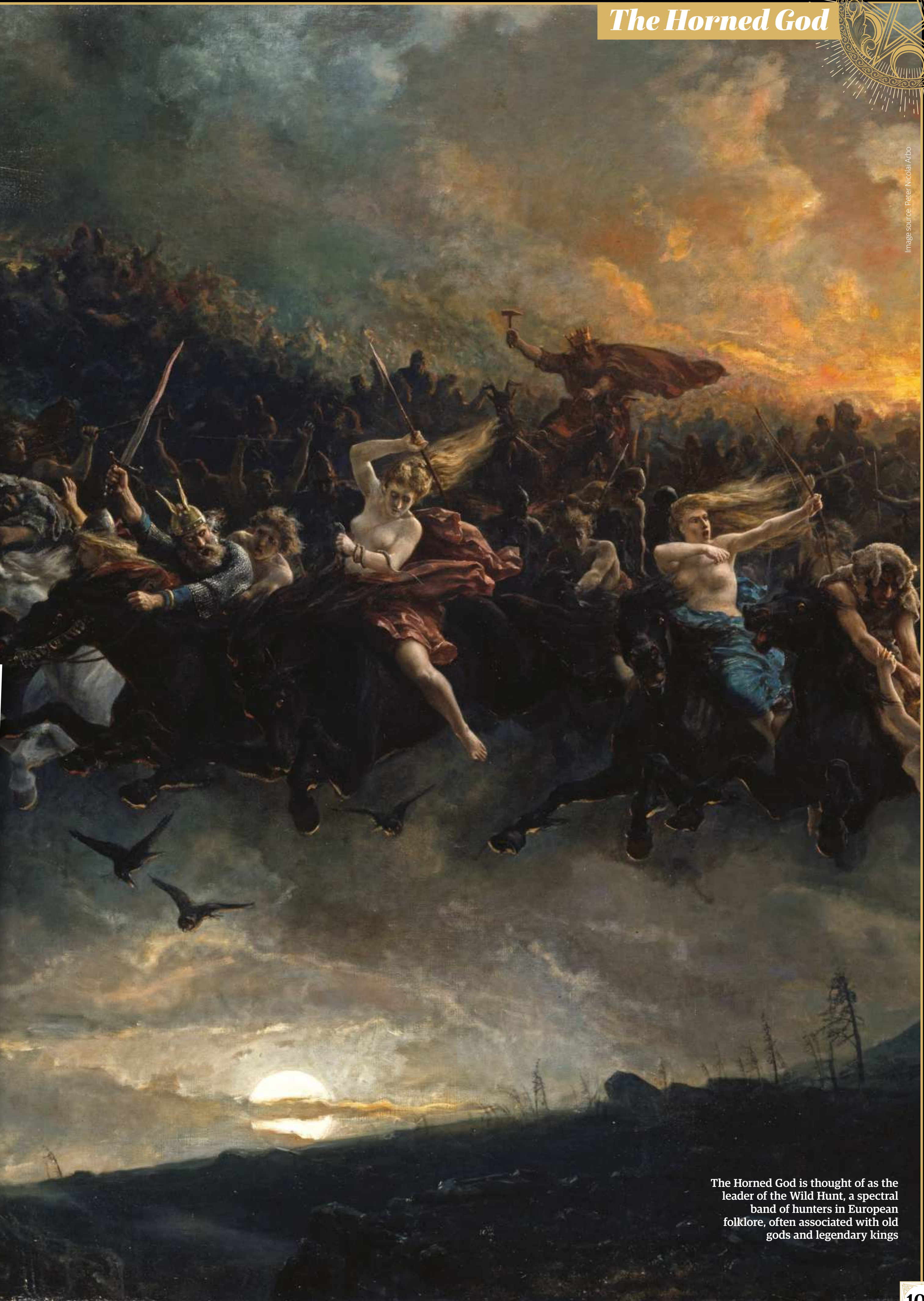


Image source: Peter Nicolai Arbo

The Horned God is thought of as the leader of the Wild Hunt, a spectral band of hunters in European folklore, often associated with old gods and legendary kings

# The Great Goddess

Whether revered as a supreme Earth mother or as a three-fold goddess, the Great Goddess of Neopaganism is the epitome of the divine feminine, encompassing the world itself in her being

Written by Dee Dee Chainey

The Goddess is believed to be the source of all life, from humans to plants and animals, and often the Earth itself is seen to be her body, similar to the Greek goddess Gaia, the personification of the Earth. Much iconography shows the Goddess sleeping within the land, as the mountains and valleys form her head, hips and breasts or shoulders.

While many modern Pagans revere a pantheon, with multiple goddesses, Wicca is usually a dualistic tradition, with most focusing on one Great Goddess, and her consort, the God - both complementing and completing each other, with the development of their relationship forming the basis of the Wheel of the Year. In this form, the Goddess is the main deity, with all other goddesses - and their names and attributes - becoming aspects of her, which can be called upon and worshipped for the specific aspects of life they have dominion over. For some Wiccans, like those following the Dianic tradition, the Goddess is the sole focus of their worship, while other Wiccans choose to worship many goddesses as aspects of the Great Goddess.

The Sacred Feminine is an idea that developed in the 1970s from Hindu beliefs, and was popularised within New Age movements. The Goddess Movement, focusing solely on worship of the Goddess herself, became popular with many, focusing on aspects of womens' life that were previously unmentionable: menstruation, sexuality and the reality of motherhood. Today in Britain,much of this worship is centred at Glastonbury, particularly at the site of the healing Chalice Well, a site of sacred pilgrimage, whose red water is thought to symbolise menstruation, or the life-giving blood of childbirth.

For many Neopagans, the Goddess is intrinsically linked with the Moon and its cycles. The Triple Goddess is the epitome of this symbolism. First introduced by the infamous Robert Graves, with questionable roots in historical scholarship yet much poetic attraction, the idea encompasses a tri-fold goddess that reflects the supposed stages of a woman's life: the embodiment of the Sacred Feminine within the archetypes of the Maiden, Mother and Crone. The movements of the Moon through the lunar cycle represent these stages: the waxing crescent is for the Maiden, a woman as she is developing, full of independence like the fierce Artemis, and the potential of new life.

The full moon represents the Mother stage, when the Sacred Feminine is at its peak, filled with creative energy, with the swollen belly seen in the fullness of the Moon's form.

The crone phase of life is epitomised by the waning crescent, when the Goddess is the Cailleach, the wise Hag of Winter, ruling the dark mysteries of life and death, with control over destiny as the wise midwife.

Image source: MatthiasKabel

The Venus of Willendorf, believed to be a statue of a prehistoric mother goddess by many, was carved around 30,000 years ago during the Upper Paleolithic Period

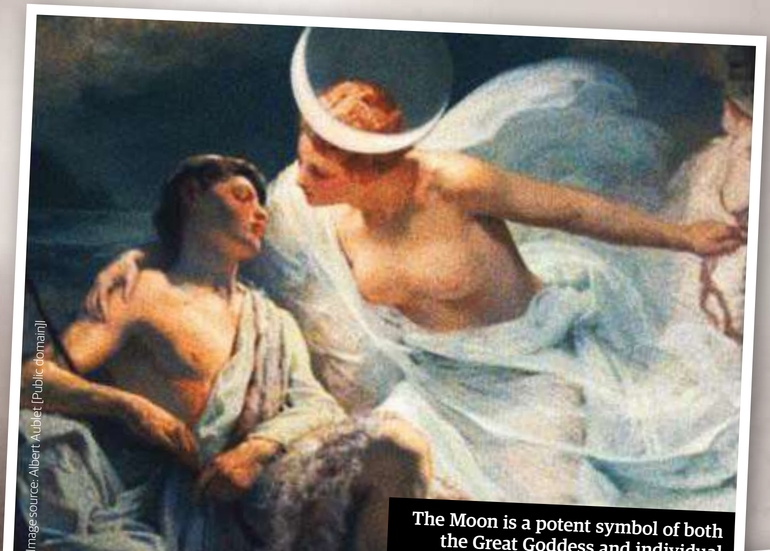


Image source: Albert Aublet [Public domain]

The Moon is a potent symbol of both the Great Goddess and individual lunar goddesses like Selene and Diana

Image source: Getty

One of the most famous depictions is the The Sleeping Goddess in the Lost Gardens of Heligan, where the Goddess' body is the land itself

"Much iconography shows the Goddess sleeping within the land"

Image source: Pixabay

*The Charge of the Goddess* is a Wiccan sacred text, used by the High Priestess to embody the Goddess from within the sacred circle

The full Moon is seen as the pinnacle point of the lunar calendar, when psychic abilities and intuition are at their strongest

Image source: Pixabay

Image source: Getty

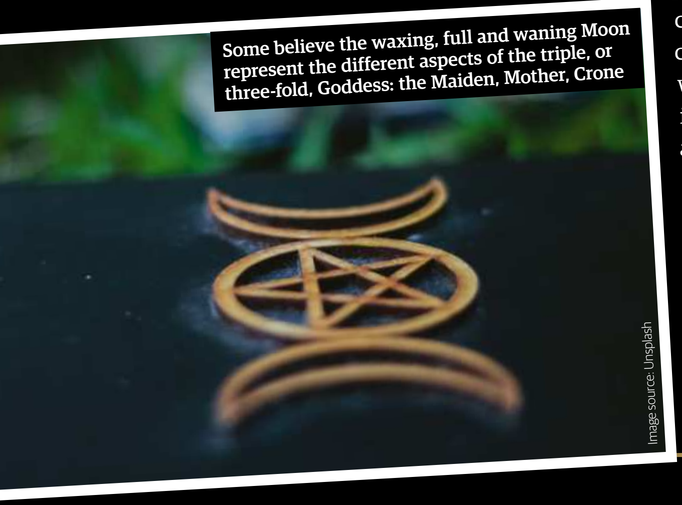
# Full Moon, esbats & magic

While the idea of 'Pagan rituals' conjures images of witches performing dark magic under the full Moon, the reality is very different...

Written by Dee Dee Chainey

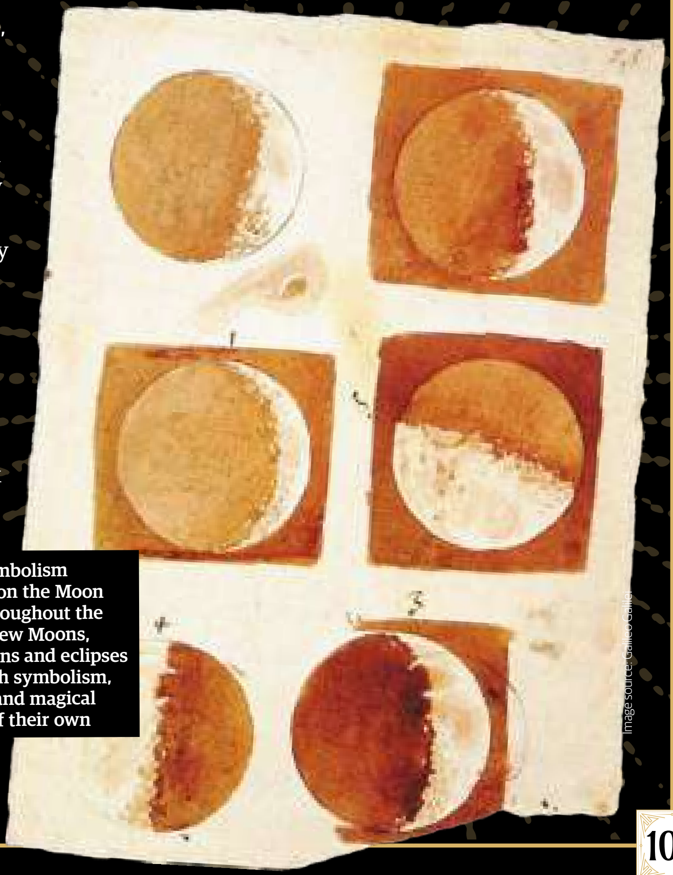
Much Paganism is grounded in the lunar cycle, and each phase has its own specific energy. The period when the Moon diminishes from the full Moon to the dark Moon is called the waning Moon, and often linked with banishing magic: a time of cleansing, reflection and the clearing out of the old. In contrast, the period when it grows from dark to full is called the waxing Moon, associated with growth, new possibilities and building intention. The full Moon itself is one of the most magically potent times of the Pagan month. It is a time of illumination, when the Moon is at its full power and things will be brought into the light; the time when all waxing Moon magic will come to fruition and manifest. Many Pagans see the moon as a symbol of the Goddess.

Traditionally, full Moon 'esbats' are monthly gatherings where many Pagans meet in groups to celebrate their faith on or around the evening of the full Moon. Sometimes the groups will identify as a coven, particularly if they are Wiccan group. While these meetings often take place outdoors within nature, city-based groups often also meet in houses, local spiritual centres, or even pub function rooms. In contrast, many solitary Pagans will conduct their own personal ceremonies outdoors or at home. Druid groves do not celebrate esbats or hold full Moon gatherings in the same way; some prefer to meet at the dark or new Moon, yet full Moon worship is still commonplace, just holding different symbolism. Full Moon celebrations are considered more personal and less ceremonial than the Sabbats, which honour the more formal festivals of the Wheel of the Year. Many Pagans find observing these additional 12 or 13 full Moon evenings a year a way of taking regular time out to mark their spirituality and celebrate their beliefs. A circle is often cast to create a sacred, protected space within which to conduct a full Moon ritual - often calling on spirits or elementals as witness - and banished once work is complete. Meaningful rituals are performed, and thanks is given to nature or the chosen deities in the form of prayer, poetry, song or chanting. Some use this time for divination, for example a tarot or oracle reading for the month ahead. Meditations often take place around seasonal themes, or surrounding the specific names for each full Moon - which vary, depending on a person's beliefs and tradition. Full Moon esbats can include performing candle magic or other forms of spellwork, often with a focus on cleansing, healing, or spiritual balance and progression.



**Some believe the waxing, full and waning Moon represent the different aspects of the triple, or three-fold, Goddess: the Maiden, Mother, Crone**

Image source: Unsplash



**Lunar symbolism depends on the Moon phase throughout the month. New Moons, dark Moons and eclipses come with symbolism, worship and magical themes of their own**

Image source: Galileo Galilei

# The Wheel of the Year

The Wheel of the Year, marking the cyclical progression of the seasons, is an important feature in the lives of many Pagans today

Written by Willow Winsham

The idea of the year as a wheel, cycling through the four seasons in a never-ending journey from darkness to light, features with varying degrees of prominence in the beliefs of many modern Pagans. Although there are variations between groups and locations, the Wheel of the Year generally marks eight (or in some cases four) seasonal festivals that celebrate the cyclic nature of the world around us.

Linked to the annual journey of the Sun and the birth, death, and rebirth of the gods, the wheel is based on the natural solar divisions of the solstices and equinoxes, with four of the festivals – Ostara, Litha, Mabon and Yule – marking these quarter days of the year. The two solstices mark the point when the Sun reaches its highest point in the sky at each pole, and thus the longest and shortest days of the year, the start of summer and winter. By contrast, as the name implies, the two equinoxes are the points when the sun is directly above the equator, with day and night being of almost equal length and heralding the start of spring and autumn. Imbolc, Beltane, Lughnasadh and Samhain, the remaining four festivals, mark a seasonal midpoint between each, and are known as cross quarter days. Although attempts have been made to prove a direct continuity from the past to the present, historically, evidence suggests that in practice, the wheel of eight festivals was not celebrated in its current form until recent times. There were many variations in what was celebrated and when, and the cycle that is now observed was not in place for our ancestors. For instance, Celtic practice may have focused on the cross quarter days, while Anglo Saxons observed the quarter days for their celebrations. Under the influence of Robert Graves, Gerald Gardner and others, by the mid 20th century, the Wheel of the Year and the festivals within it, were familiar terminology within Pagan communities. The ways in which the festivals are celebrated today however does have roots in folklore practices and traditions. The focus now as then were community sabbats or celebrations, coming together to give thanks, with offerings made to nature, the deities or spirits revered on a collective or individual level. Solitary Pagans may also choose to celebrate the Sabbats alone, in their own way.

Rituals and incantations, along with feasting and celebration, make up the modern observance of the seasonal festivals of the year

Image source: Getty

> "By the mid 20th century, the Wheel of the Year and the festivals within it, were familiar terminology"

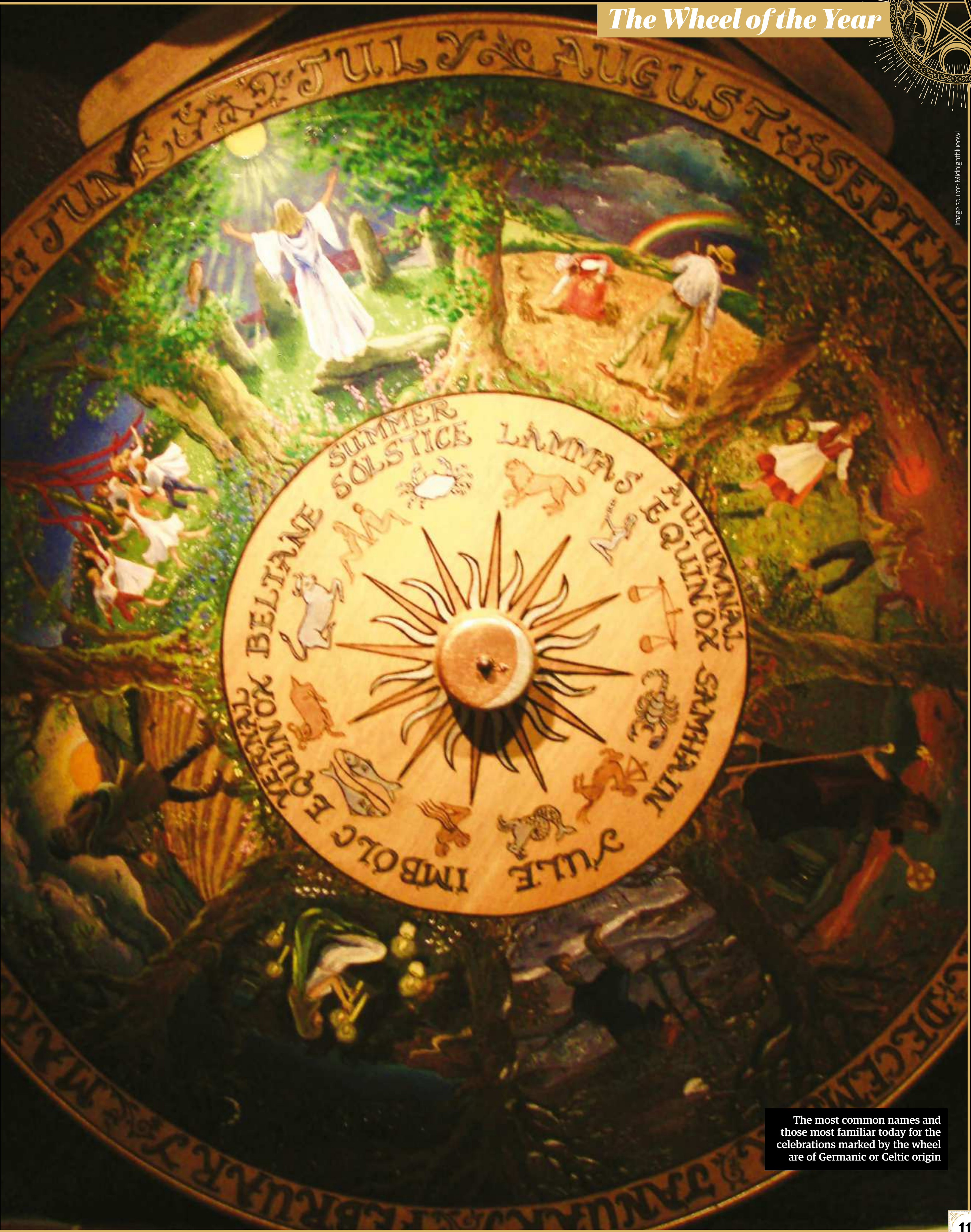

JUNE
JULY
AUGUST
SEPTEM
DECEMBER
JANUARY
FEBRUARY
MARCH
SUMMER SOLSTICE
LAMMAS
AUTUMNAL EQUINOX
SAMHAIN
YULE
IMBOLC
VERNAL EQUINOX
BELTANE

Image source: Midnightblueowl

The most common names and those most familiar today for the celebrations marked by the wheel are of Germanic or Celtic origin

Image source: Alamy

Many midwinter festivals have similar themes, such as the birth or return of a god, symbolically linked to the Sun

This Holly King figure stands in South Barrule in the UK's Isle of Man. He represents the energy of the dark half of the year, between midsummer and the winter festival Yule

# Yule

The longest, darkest night of the year is the time when solar deities are reborn, as the Sun returns and the days begin to lengthen

Written by Willow Winsham

Mistletoe is associated with Yule. In Roman tradition it symbolises protection while travelling through the underworld, as in the *Aeneid*

Image source: Thinkstock

With its distinctive red berries and sharp leaves, at Yule holly represents the shift from the dark half of the year into the light

Image source: Thinkstock

The midwinter festival celebrated on 21 December is most commonly known today as Yule. Of pre-Christian origin, with connections that span back to the Neolithic period and perhaps beyond, Yule takes place at the midwinter solstice, or the longest night, the day when, in the northern hemisphere, the north pole is tilted furthest away from the Sun.

A time of hope and rebirth, Yule brings with it the promise of gradually lengthening days and the return of the Sun and the warmth it brings. The focus of the celebrations is the idea of light coming forth out of darkness, along with the death of the Sun and subsequent rebirth. The Holly King who rules over the dark half of the year is believed by many to give way to the Oak King, who brings with him the returning light.

Yule has connections with other midwinter festivals such as Saturnalia, the ancient Roman festival celebrated between 17 and 23 December. This precursor of many future midwinter celebrations was held in the name of Saturn, and was a time of great feasting and merriment. Saturnalia is best known as a festival of social subversion, when slaves could speak their mind without repercussions, and were feasted by their masters. It also shares obvious similarities with Christmas, with much of the same imagery and traditions adopted by the later Christian festival.

One of the most popular traditions associated with Yule is the Yule log. Amidst much revelry, the selected branch or log was taken into the house and set in the hearth, decorated, then doused with spirits. Using a section from the previous Yule log, kept for that purpose, the new log was lit, with the idea that celebrations continue as long as it burns. Nothing was wasted, with the ashes used to protect fields and enhance the fertility of the soil.

The use of greenery is also prominent in Yule celebrations, with evergreens used for decoration and symbolism throughout. Holly, pine, ivy and oak are common, often on windowsills or doorways or fashioned into wreaths. These are seen as signs of life everlasting, immortality, protection, healing, regeneration and rebirth. Mistletoe is also closely associated with Yule, both as protection from evil and as a sign of fertility. The familiar colours associated with Yule, red, green and white, reflect the significance of these plants and trees. Beware though, they must be removed by Twelfth Night, in order to avoid bad luck for the year to come.

> “The focus of the celebrations is light coming forth out of darkness”

# Imbolc

The stirrings of spring, marking the end of the dark half of the year, Imbolc was celebrated with candles, rushes, and the presence of the goddess Brigid

Written by Willow Winsham

The festival of Imbolc was, historically, another of the four seasonal celebrations observed by Gaelic communities during the year. Taking place on 1 February, this festival marked the start of spring, with all the hope, wonder and enthusiasm that time heralded.

Unlike some celebrations of more recent origin, Imbolc appears to have held an important place in the Irish calendar from at least the 10th century. Like many such traditions, the exact origin of the name is uncertain. Suggestions include derivation from the old Irish word or cleansing, or, another suggestion, the meaning "in the belly" as a nod to the ewes that were expectant at that time of year.

Imbolc is sometimes referred to as Candlemas, after the Christian festival of motherhood and light held around the same time

Brigid, originally as a pagan goddess and then as a Christian saint, is an important Imbolc figure. Although practices varied, the idea that Brigid ushered in the lighter days of spring , leading people from the dark half of the year, was central to her part in Imbolc traditions. Deeply venerated, she was invited into households as an honoured guest, where she was variously feasted, entertained and invited to sleep in a specially prepared bed. Households would leave small objects in the hope Brigid would bless them when she visited on Imbolc eve. Rushes or reeds also played a big part; in Northern Ireland they were carried as a symbolic Brigid circled the household, some were laid out on the floor, fashioned into crosses, or used to make the saint a bed to sleep in.

Brideogs, representations of Brigid made from reeds and dressed in cloth and flowers, were familiar sights in both Ireland and Scotland. Processions took them from house to house, where gifts and further decoration were bestowed upon them, before the figure was feasted and laid to rest for the night.

The purifying nature of fire was significant, with candles marking a reminder of the promise of the Sun returning as the year unfolded.

Today, Brigid is at the heart of Pagan Imbolc celebrations. Imbolc also has links to the Gaelic winter hag, the Cailleach. As tradition goes, it is at Imbolc that she collects wood for her fire to see her through to the end of the winter. A sunny Imbolc enabled her to collect more, and thus foretold a long winter. If the weather at Imbolc is bad, then winter will soon be over, as the Cailleach would not have enough firewood to last. Today, Imbolc is celebrated in a variety of forms.

"The purifying nature of fire was significant"

Flowers such as the snowdrop are among the first to signal the changing of the seasons, as Imbolc ushers in the spring

In a recent Imbolc celebration, the Green Man and Jack Frost do battle for control of the seasons: spring emerges triumphant

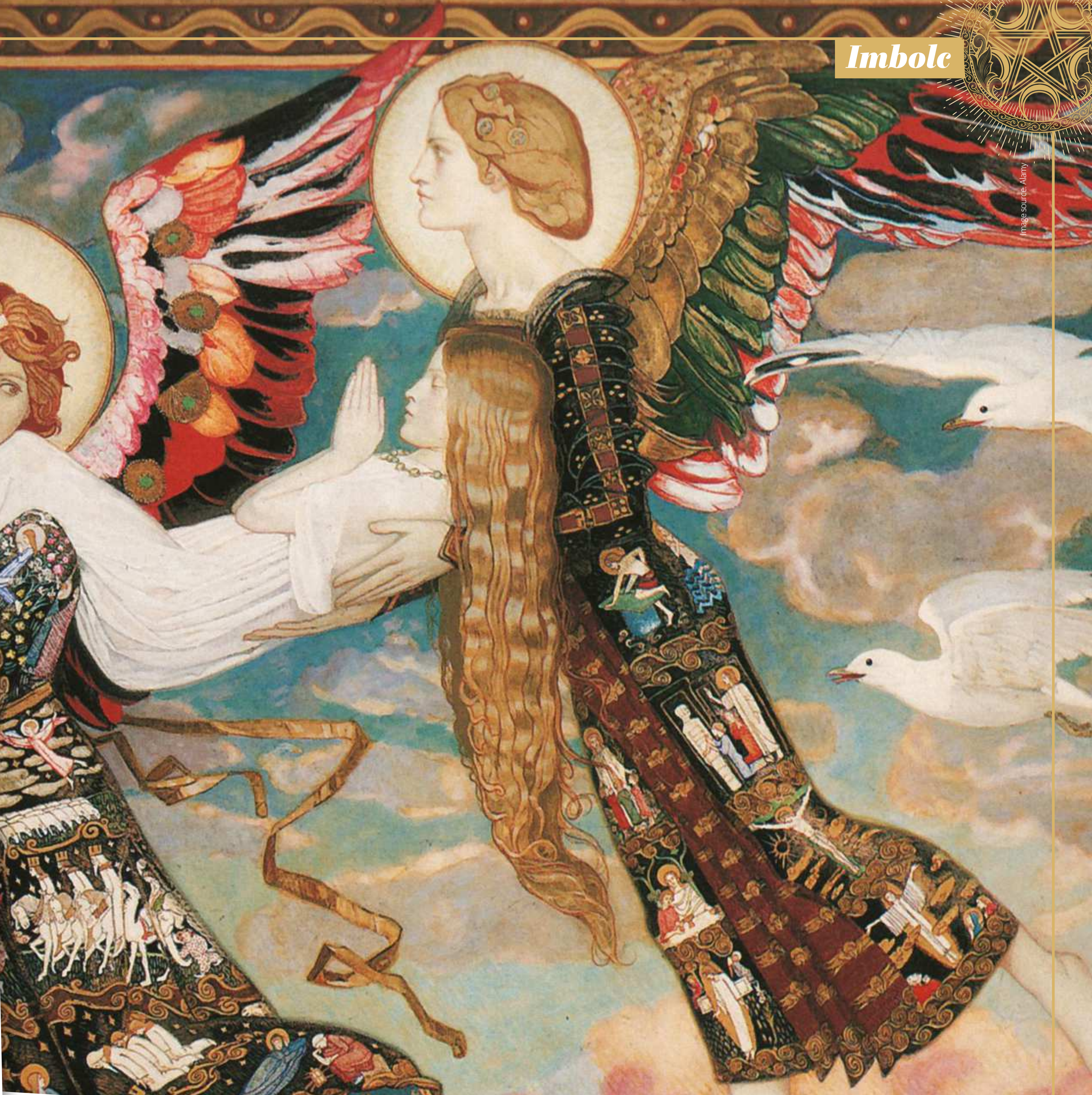


Image source: Alamy

Brigid, either as goddess or saint, has featured prominently in Imbolc celebrations throughout history, and is central to Pagan festivities as goddess today

Image source: Redsimon

Image source: Getty

Image source: Getty

# Ostara

Modern celebration, worship of an ancient goddess, or the origin of Easter; what do eggs, hares and church fathers have to do with the spring equinox?

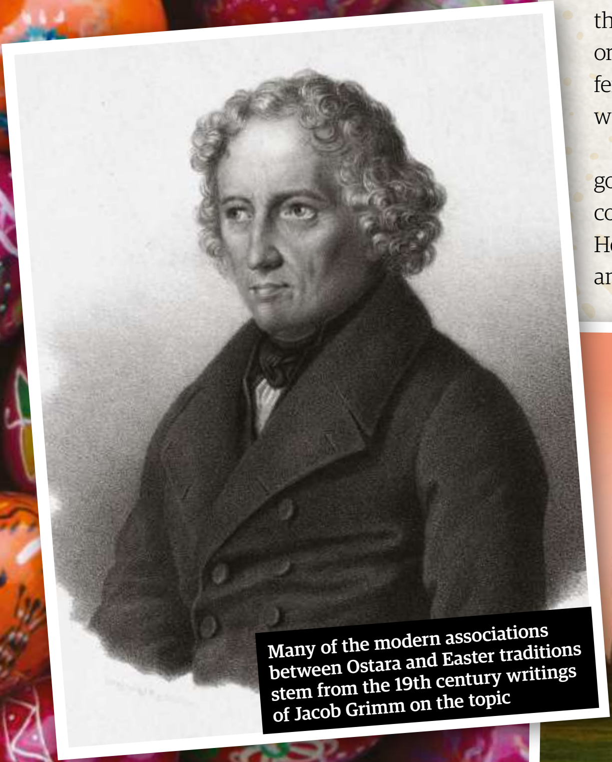
Written by Willow Winsham

Ostara is a festival of spring time. Usually celebrated by many at the time of the spring equinox, falling between 19 and 22 March each year, the overarching theme of this celebration, observed by many Pagans today, is that of new beginnings, new life, fertility and renewal. One of the times of year when the nights and days are of equal length, Ostara heralds the shift towards longer, lighter days, the beginning of new cycles of life amidst nature, and the celebration of the Spring Maiden, with her promise of fertility and renewal. Flowers, eggs and rabbits are all strongly associated with modern Ostara and its celebrations.

Ostara, or Eostre is believed by many to be the goddess of this festival, and holds significance for many modern Pagans in their celebrations at this time of year. Ideas about the goddess include origins as an ancient goddess of the dawn, or a fertility goddess, though her biggest association is with the bringing of spring.

But what were the origins of this popular goddess? The only historical reference to Eostre comes from the writings of church father, Bede. He refers to the old name for April, Eosturmonata, and his assumption it marked the celebration of a Germanic goddess of that name. The writings of 19th century folklorist Jacob Grimm helped further perpetuate and popularise the idea. His was the first mention of the Germanic Ostara, and it is from his work that most 'ancient facts' regarding the goddess actually stem from. Other fallacies frequently repeated regarding Ostara and Eostre include an assumed etymological link to the word oestrogen, and links with the Assyrian goddess Ishtar. Hares, eggs and bunnies were also absent from the historical festival until amalgamated into it by Jacob Grimm, but have, thanks to the promulgation of his work, become associated with modern celebrations of Ostara.

Although debate exists today over whether Bede outright invented Eostre for purposes that remain unclear, this does little to diminish her popularity. A tale with origins in the 19th century tells of how the goddess was late to bring the spring one year. As a result, a small bird died, much to the grief of a little girl who found it. What did the goddess do? She turned the poor creature into a snow hare, the magical creature delighting the child by laying rainbow coloured eggs. Each year, the goddess told the girl, watch for the arrival of the snow hare. For then everyone would know that spring had arrived.



Many of the modern associations between Ostara and Easter traditions stem from the 19th century writings of Jacob Grimm on the topic

Hundreds gather at Stonehenge each year to watch the sun rise that marks the dawn of the spring equinox

Image source: Thinkstock

# Beltane

Amidst fire and feasting, flowers and rituals of protection, Beltane celebrations mark the long-awaited start of summer and the warm months to follow

Written by Willow Winsham

Beltane is the cross quarter day of the year celebrated on 1 May, also popularly known as May Day. This seasonal festival marks the beginning of summer, and is one of the most important and widely celebrated festivals of the Wheel of the Year.

Both historically and today, fire and Beltane go hand in hand. Bonfires have been a central part of Beltane celebrations for centuries past, both in celebration and ritual. One such ritual, recorded in Irish sources from the 10th century, involves leading cattle through or round lit bonfires amidst incantations, in the belief that this would bring protection for the months to come. It has also been considered lucky to walk around or jump over the bonfire. Bonfires feature prominently in celebrations of Beltane today, and it is still considered lucky to jump over the Beltane bonfire. Another important aspect of Beltane celebration is feasting, with offerings made to the spirits or gods for a fertile and prosperous summer ahead.

Beltane festivities are often associated with love spells and fertility rites as well as cleansing fire and protection rituals

Although Belanus, 'The Shining One', a Sun god of Celtic origin, is often said to be associated with Beltane, as is Bel, the protector and father god, there is little historical evidence for these deities being a part of earlier celebrations. 'Bel' might, in fact, refer to a small gap or passage, while 'tane' or 'taine' is Old Irish for 'fire'.

For Beltane, windows and doors were decorated with May flowers. These were not mere ornament however, for those points of entry were believed to need most protection in a household. The hanging of boughs over doorways was also believed to bring good milk production for cows. It is also at Beltane that we see such familiar traditions as maypole dancing, the decorating of may bushes, and the crowning of the May Queen.

The veil between the worlds is said to be thin at Beltane. Due to this, there are many superstitions and traditions linked with May Day and May Eve. The first dew of Beltane is said to have magical qualities, guaranteeing those who bathe in it a perfect complexion.

The popularity of Beltane slowly declined, however, and by the mid 20th century was no longer widely celebrated. There has since been a cultural revival in some areas, with old and new practices coming together into modern celebrations of Beltane as observed by Pagans today.

"Bonfires feature prominently in celebrations of Beltane today"

For those who rise early there is magic to be found in May Day dew; washing in it will ensure a fresh, clear complexion

Image source: Rvasudev

The 2019 Beltane celebrations in Edinburgh addressed climate change, with the May Queen shown in anger at the current state of the world

Image source: Alamy

Image source: Getty

Fire, known for its protective and cleansing properties, is central to celebrations of Beltane, both past and present

# Litha

## The midsummer festival Litha celebrates the power of the Sun and the conquest of night, yet hints at the darkness to come

Written by Ben Gazur

The summer solstice has always been a traditional focal point of the year. On 21 or 22 June, in the northern hemisphere, the Sun reaches the end of its seasonal wanderings. No day is longer and no night is shorter. For Pagans this day is marked by the festival of Litha and represents the triumph of light over darkness.

Throughout northern Europe the day has been traditionally marked by huge bonfires whose blazes further diminish the night. Those who leapt through the flames, without mishap, were considered to have been blessed for the coming year. In the past midsummer was celebrated by setting fire to a wooden wheel representing the Sun and rolling it down a hill into a lake. This may reflect the dual nature of the summer solstice, in that while it is the longest day it also presages the return of winter, as from then on the days will become ever shorter. Christians incorporated midsummer festivities into their calendar by joining them to the feast of Saint John.

From the ancient veneration of midsummer in the old religions, the celebration of Litha has developed in modern Paganism. Traditionally the Oak King is thought to be at his strongest, with his brother the Holly King at his lowest ebb. To celebrate the victory of the Oak King, oak trees can be decorated with colourful scraps of cloth. With all the riches of the summer available Litha is a time of feasting on nature's delights like honey. It is also a time of purification when the dangers of the coming months can be washed away in wild bodies of water.

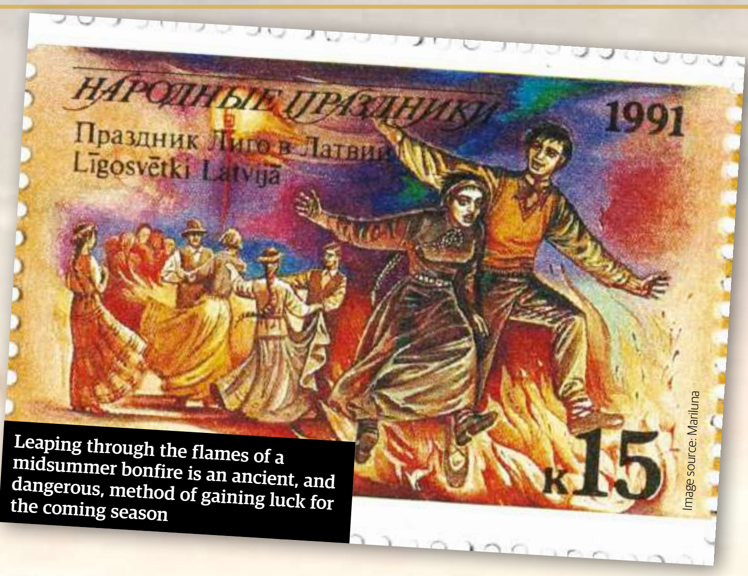
There are many ways to observe Litha, and as many consider it to be a day full of magic, there are many spells and rituals that can be performed then. In the day the light of the Sun may be used to gather herbs at their most potent. At night the fires that are set are thought to ward away evil as well as darkness. Folklore gives us many rites to try around these fires. Wishes can be 'given to a pebble' – whisper a wish to a stone in your hand as you walk three times around the fire and then toss it in if you want your wish to come true. Even the cold ashes of a Litha bonfire have power if they are used to create a magical talisman.

Midsummer celebrates both the longest day of the Sun and the awareness that the days will now begin to shorten

"Many consider it to be a day full of magic"

Midsummer celebrations often incorporate fire to help drive back the night even further and extend the victory of the Sun

Image source: Petri Tapola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Leaping through the flames of a midsummer bonfire is an ancient, and dangerous, method of gaining luck for the coming season

Image source: Mariluna

The summer solstice, also called Litha, is a time of pilgrimage for modern Pagans to ancient sites like Stonehenge

Image source: Getty

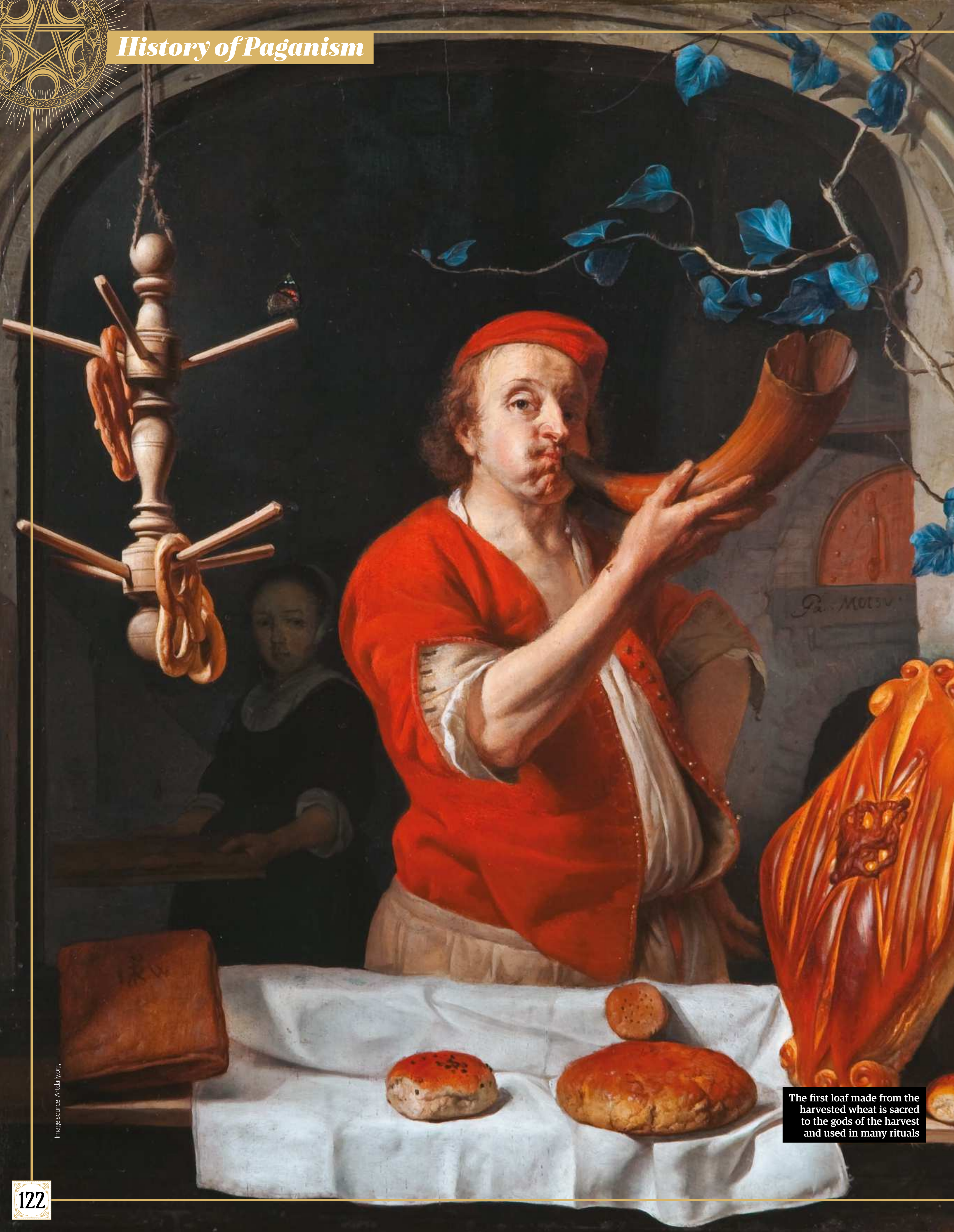


Image source: Artdaily.org

The first loaf made from the harvested wheat is sacred to the gods of the harvest and used in many rituals

# Lughnasadh

The first of three harvest festivals, Lughnasadh or Lammas focuses on the first wheat of the year, and the bread made from it

Written by Ben Gazur

Lughnasadh, also known as Lammas, marks the mid-point between summer and autumn and is the first of three harvest festival in the Pagan year. Falling around the beginning of August (or February in the southern hemisphere) it coincides with the first fruits of the harvest being brought in. In agrarian societies the time before the first harvest would have been one of dwindling supplies as they waited for the grain to ripen. After the backbreaking work of harvest, a celebration of the bounty was only natural.

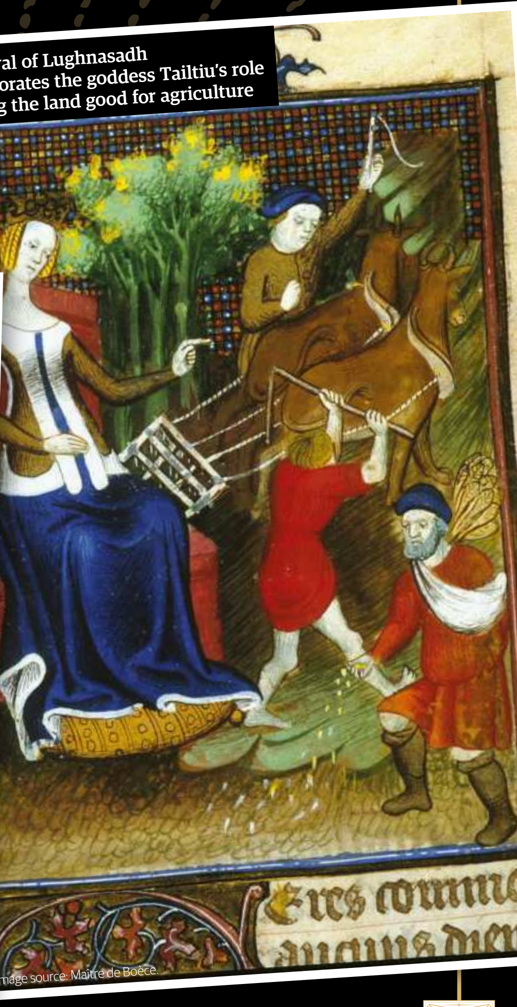
Lughnasadh takes its name from the Irish god Lugh, who is said to have instituted the festival in honour of his foster-mother Tailtiu. Tailtiu spent her life, literally, clearing Ireland to make it suitable for agriculture. At the end of her labours she dropped dead, so Lugh decided to celebrate her efforts when the first harvest came each year. Lughnasadh shows how the cycle of life, death, harvesting, and sowing are all bound together, with one year's crop being the next year's seed.

Lammas, meaning Loaf Mass, was the time in England when the first wheat was cut and turned into bread. The first loaf of the year was a sacred item and consecrated. An Anglo-Saxon ritual saw this bread torn into quarters and placed in the corners of a barn to protect the rest of the harvest. Christian tradition also saw the importance of the day, and loaves would be blessed by priests and marked with symbols.

Today Lammas and Lughnasadh are celebrated by Wiccans and other Pagans in many ways. As with other Sabbats in the Wheel of the Year, bonfires are popular. Here they mirror the Sun that has made the plants grow and give thanks, hopefully, for the good weather that accompanies the harvest. The baking of a special loaf is often performed and it may be shaped into the figure of a god, or of sheaves of wheat. Ritually eating the god brings the power of the harvest within the worshipper. The last stalks of wheat harvested are made into corn dollies.

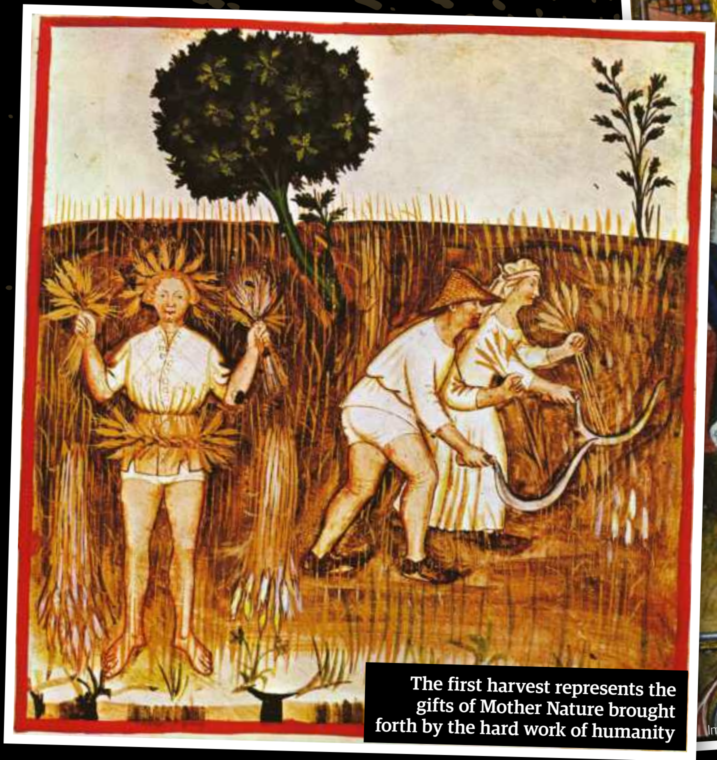
Other rites may prove more powerful at Lammas. Gerald Gardner and other witches used this day to perform a ritual in 1940 that was supposed raise a 'cone of power' over Britain and stop the Nazis invading. Not all gatherings have such lofty aims and many Pagans meet at Lammas to dance, sing, and feast to welcome back another successful and fertile year.

> "Gerald Gardner used this day in 1940 to perform a ritual to stop the Nazis invading Britain"



The festival of Lughnasadh commemorates the goddess Tailtiu's role in making the land good for agriculture

Image source: Maître de Boèce



The first harvest represents the gifts of Mother Nature brought forth by the hard work of humanity

# Mabon

At the autumnal equinox the nights become longer than the days, and people must prepare for the dark times ahead

Written by Ben Gazur

The autumnal equinox, when day and night are of equal length, is a turning point in the year. Mabon is the day that begins the descent into winter as night overtakes day. Yet it is also a celebration as the second harvest festival in the Pagan calendar as nature continues to offer up its treasures. With the main harvest coming to an end, the equinox was a time of change. Farm labourers would be released from their contracts and new work sought. The whole year ahead might depend on your luck at this time.

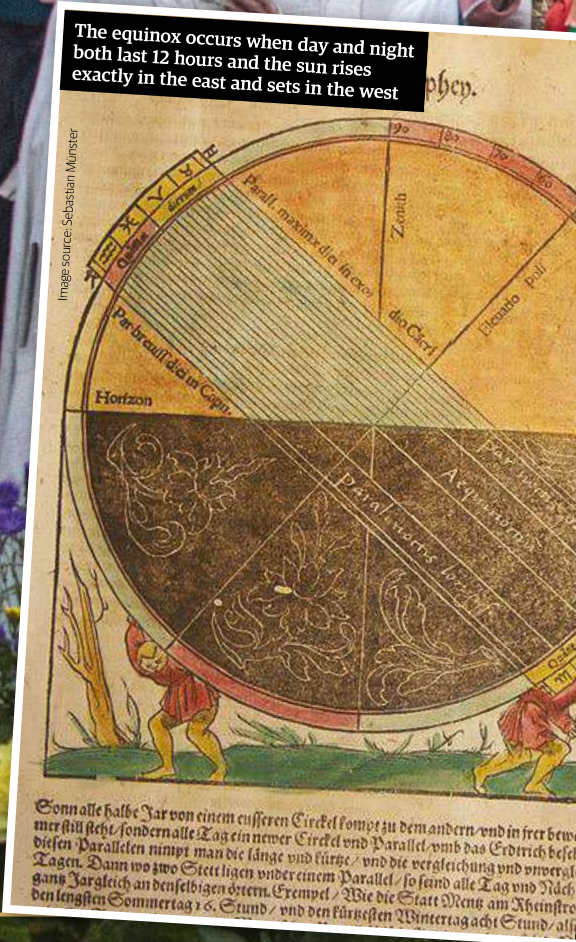
The equinox was a key time of year for our ancestors, who had to work by daylight alone. As the sun lessened there were fewer hours in the day in which to store away food for the hard winter ahead. Many cultures marked the autumnal equinox, with many ancient sites being built so as to align with the rising Sun on those days. Pagans today will often gather at such sites to worship. While nothing can be done to stop the seasonal disappearance of the Sun, Pagans offer up praise for its abundance and calls for it to return in spring. The rite acknowledges the seasonal nature of sunlight, growth and the Earth.

The name 'Mabon' comes from the legend of an Arthurian knight, who was the son of a Welsh Earth Mother goddess

The ancient pagans of Greece and Rome associated the Autumnal Equinox with the tale of Demeter and Persephone (Ceres and Proserpina to the Romans). Demeter was the fertility goddess responsible for the natural world and Persephone was her daughter. When the god of the dead stole Persephone away, Demeter in her grief stopped all living things from growing and winter set in. To save the Earth it was decreed that Persephone should spend half the year in Hades and half with her mother. While Persephone is in the realm of the living Demeter is happy and summer prevails, but the autumnal equinox marked her passage to the underworld.

To some Pagans the equinox is called Mabon and is a time to think on the delicate balance of life. Others see the ripening of grapes as a reason to celebrate the loosening powers of wine. Those wishing to see the future may wish to cut open an apple horizontally. The seeds inside form a pentagram and in the whorls of flesh around them can be read symbols of your fortune. The Harvest Moon, the full Moon closest to the equinox, is considered by some to be especially powerful.

> "The whole year ahead might depend on your luck at this time"


Zenith
Horizon
Elevatio Poli

The equinox occurs when day and night both last 12 hours and the sun rises exactly in the east and sets in the west

Image source: Sebastian Münster

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33
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Mabon falls at the height of the harvest and is a time to enjoy the riches of the field

Long recognised in the ancient world as a special day, the autumnal equinox is still celebrated by Pagans today at spiritually potent sites

Image source: Getty

# Samhain

### Halloween may have largely replaced it, but Samhain is still one of the most important festivals in the Pagan year

Written by Ben Gazur

Samhain, falling on 31 October, is the last of the three harvest festivals for Pagans. It also marks the true beginning of winter and was seen as a day of the dead. Several Neolithic tombs were constructed in such a way that the light of sunrise on Samhain would illuminate the interior. The Christian Allhallowtide held on the same day may preserve this association with the dead, as its ringing of church bells is thought to provide comfort to the departed.

The early descriptions of Samhain in Irish literature show it as a time to end farming and warfare and to gather families and tribes together to survive the winter. In the cold nights there was much drinking and tale-telling to pass the time. Samhain itself was a time of potential danger, as the fairies would open their mounds and it was possible for the dead to return from the spirit realm. Samhain was the time when cattle and other livestock were slaughtered and preserved for winter and it may have been a time that was associated with sacrifices.

On Samhain the fire in the hearth was allowed to burn out while people worked in the fields. That night bonfires were lit to ward off evil and fire was taken from these to relight the home fires. The smoke from the great fires was thought to be protective. Sometimes two fires were lit and villagers and livestock would pass between them.

Today bonfires are still lit at Samhain. Major cities such as Edinburgh see large processions of people carrying flaming torches alongside drums and music. Traditionally the festivities of Samhain could be accompanied by dressing up and disguise. Boys would sometimes go from house to house to beg wood to be added to the communal fire. To light the way revellers carved lanterns from turnips and wurzels. It is easy to see how Samhain influenced the later traditions of Halloween, which many people celebrate today.

For modern Pagans, Samhain is both a time to remember the dead and to celebrate. Feasts are often held as a way of offering hospitality to the deceased. You may want to bake a batch of soul cakes to offer to the poor. It is also a time to introduce newborns to the community. Samhain can be the proper moment to reflect on things that have ended in the past year, as well as the hopes for what may come in the next.

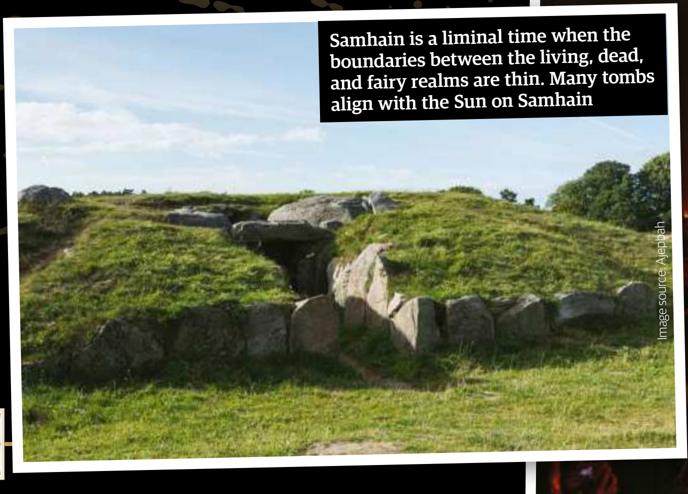
Samhain is a liminal time when the boundaries between the living, dead, and fairy realms are thin. Many tombs align with the Sun on Samhain

Image source: Alendah

Image source: Getty

Fire and mummery has long been a part of celebrating Samhain; early pagans dressed as animals and spirits

Samhain brings Pagans together to celebrate life and death as they remember those who have passed on

> The boundaries between the human world and those of the fairies and the dead are thought to grow thin and permeable at Samhain

Image source: Getty

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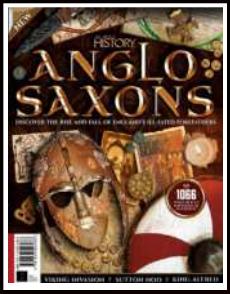

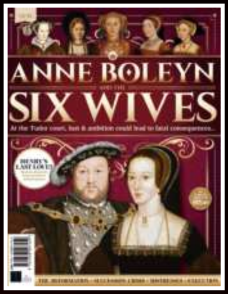

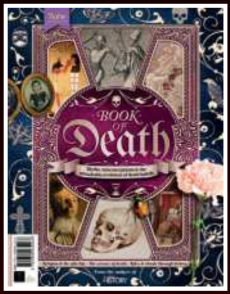

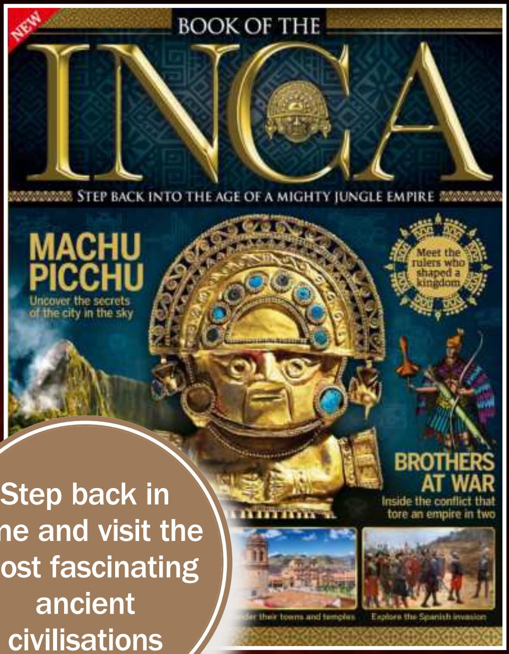

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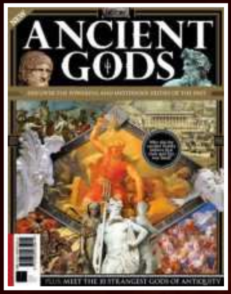

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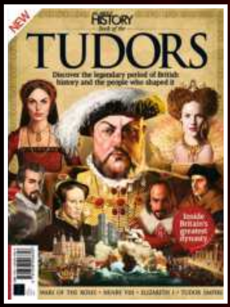

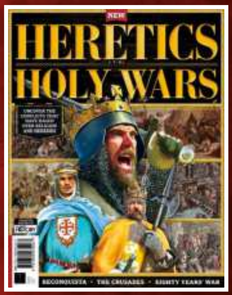

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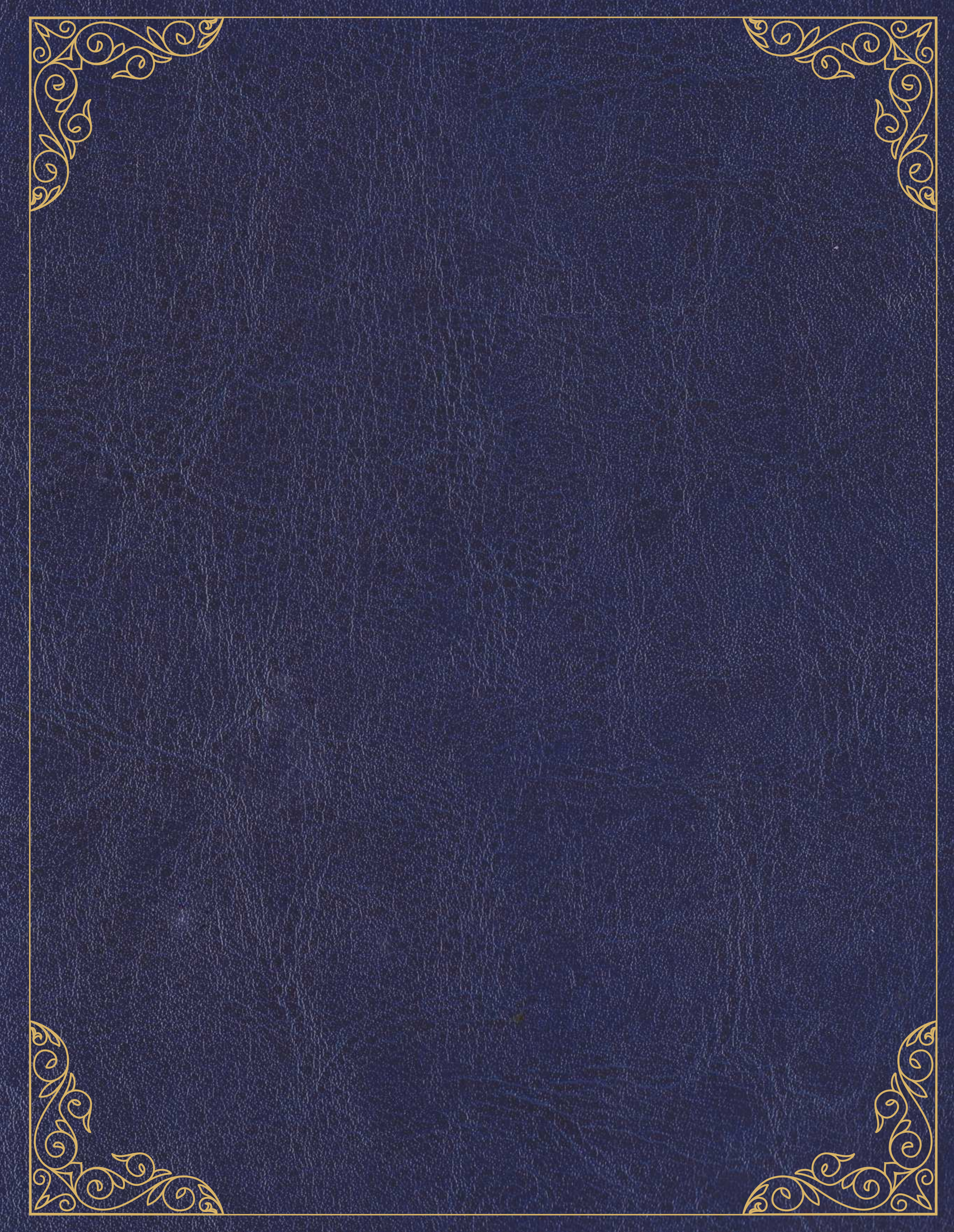

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